

Supporting Sensory-friendly Nutrition for Autistic Children - Topic of the Month

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This Topic of the Month was written with Idil Hassan, MPH nutrition student & dietetic intern from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

Autistic children are often very sensitive to how food feels, smells, and looks, which can greatly impact their willingness to try new foods. This month's topic explores how to support their nutritional needs in a sensory-friendly and respectful manner.



Understanding sensory sensitivities

Autistic children may experience heightened sensitivity to the texture, taste, smell, temperature, and appearance of food. These sensory responses can affect mealtime experiences, sometimes leading to selective eating or food refusal. For example, a child may dislike stringy textures like cooked spinach or avoid strong-smelling foods like eggs. Some may prefer plain or beige-colored foods, such as bread or pasta without sauce. Understanding that these preferences stem from sensory processing differences—rather than “picky eating”—is the foundation of sensory-friendly nutrition.

Introducing new foods

Trying new foods takes time and should be done by gradually adding new foods one at a time. Below are some strategies that can help when introducing new foods.

- Start with an accepted food and gradually modify one element at a time - such as texture, shape, or color. For example, combine enriched pasta with whole grain pasta, slowly increasing the proportion of whole grain until it is fully accepted.

- Pair new foods with preferred foods to encourage exposure without pressure.
- Involve the child in grocery shopping or food prep to increase familiarity and reduce anxiety.
- Offer new foods consistently over time; it may take 15–20 exposures before a child feels comfortable trying something new. Simply having it on the plate helps the child to get familiar with it.

Creating a calm mealtime environment

Children with sensory challenges often benefit from a structured, calm, and predictable setting. Consider the ideas below when offering support to families.

- Minimize noise and bright lighting.
- Offer meals at the same time and location daily (for example, offer dinner at 6 p.m. every day at the dinner table).
- Use familiar plates or utensils if that helps them feel safe.
- Avoid pressure to eat; this can increase anxiety and reduce food intake. Follow Ellyn Satter’s “division of responsibility” in feeding: adults decide what, when, and where food is offered; children decide whether and how much to eat (see [Raising a healthy child is a joy to feed](#)).

Nutritional tips for balanced eating

Even if children with autism enjoy only a few foods, below are some ways to help them stay healthy.

- Set regular meal and snack times- aim for three meals and two to three snacks per day.
- Keep mealtimes under 45 minutes to support natural hunger for the next meal.
- Offer nutrient-dense foods from the five major food groups – fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy – each day for balanced nutrition, even if the child only eats a few preferred foods.
- Use positive reinforcement – like praise, stickers, or high-fives– to encourage children to try new foods. For example, say “You’re doing a great job eating that broccoli” or give a sticker or high-five when they have tried something new.

Tips for encouraging acceptance during meals:

- ➔ Add veggies into foods the child already eats, like eggs, muffins, soups, and rice.
- ➔ Offer a food they enjoy after each bite of new food. Be mindful not to create a power struggle and never withhold food- always consider the child’s unique needs.
- ➔ Help families build a list of “safe” foods while gradually expanding food options using slow and respectful exposure techniques.

Refer to MyPlate educational resources for appropriate portion sizes and to help families [Eat healthy with MyPlate](#).

WIC's role

WIC staff play an important role in supporting families with autistic children. Following a complete nutrition assessment, assign risk code 362 ([WIC 362 Developmental, Sensory or Motor Disabilities Interfering with the Ability to Eat](#)) as appropriate. Provide tailored nutrition education based on each individual circumstance. Below are helpful tips for working with a family with a child on the autism spectrum.

- Assess food likes and dislikes. Understanding a child's food preferences is a key first step in helping parents support a more comfortable and positive eating experience.
- Share strategies and resources that respect the child's needs.
- Offer meal and snack ideas that match the child's sensory preferences. Providing recipes or food suggestions can help parents expand food options while supporting healthy eating.
- Provide nonjudgmental encouragement and support. Let parents know they're doing a great job and create a safe, supportive space to share their struggles and receive guidance.
- Ensure the child is receiving regular medical care. If developmental, sensory, or motor challenges related to autism interfere with the child's ability to eat, determine if any therapeutic interventions are in place and help support those. Refer families to additional resources as needed.

Tips for supporting families:

- ➔ Encourage families to use the [CDC's Milestone Tracker App](#) to learn more about their child's development from two months to five years of age. The tracker can help with early identification of developmental delays. (Available in English and Spanish.)
- ➔ Connect parents with [Help me GROW](#) for print, video, and online resources on developmental milestones, screening, and evaluation.

Takeaway

Supporting autistic children with sensory-friendly nutrition begins with understanding and patience. By creating a calm environment, understanding sensory preferences, and honoring individual needs parents can help children meet their nutritional needs and explore new foods at their own pace.

Resources

- [Overcoming Feeding Difficulties in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#). (Utah State Extension. Aug. 2019)

- [Mealtime tips for autistic children with eating challenges](#) (Autism Speaks)
- [Healthy Sensory Foods for Children With Autism](#) (Special Strong, 2025)
- [Food selectivity and sensory sensitivity in children with autism spectrum disorders](#) (National Library of Medicine. Mar. 19, 2023)
- [Nutrition and Autism Spectrum Disorder: Between False Myths and Real Research-Based Opportunities](#). (National Library of Medicine. Jun. 17, 2021)
- [Nutrition Approaches in Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) (International Journal of Science and Healthcare Research. July- Sept. 2024)
- [Promoting healthy eating](#). (Marcus Autism Center. 2024)
- [Picky Eating: 7 Ways to Introduce Your Child with Autism to New Foods](#). (Behavioral Innovations)

References- complete listing of hyperlinks:

[Eat healthy with MyPlate](https://www.myplate.gov/) (https://www.myplate.gov/)

[WIC 362 Developmental, Sensory or Motor Disabilities Interfering with the Ability to Eat](https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/riskcodes/362.html#justification1) (https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/riskcodes/362.html#justification1)

[Raising a healthy child is a joy to feed](https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/the-division-of-responsibility-in-feeding/) (https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/the-division-of-responsibility-in-feeding/)

[CDC's Milestone Tracker App](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones-app.html) (https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones-app.html)

[Help me GROW](https://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/HelpfulRes/index.html) (https://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/HelpfulRes/index.html)

[Overcoming Feeding Difficulties in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3055&context=extension_curall) (https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3055&context=extension_curall)

[Mealtime tips for autistic children with eating challenges](https://www.autismspeaks.org/expert-opinion/autism-food-refusal-mealtime-tips) (https://www.autismspeaks.org/expert-opinion/autism-food-refusal-mealtime-tips)

[Healthy Sensory Foods for Children With Autism](https://www.specialstrong.com/healthy-sensory-foods-for-children-with-autism/#:~:text=By%20incorporating%20colorful%20sensory%20foods,foods%20also%20promotes%20mindful%20eating) (https://www.specialstrong.com/healthy-sensory-foods-for-children-with-autism/#:~:text=By%20incorporating%20colorful%20sensory%20foods,foods%20also%20promotes%20mindful%20eating)

[Food selectivity and sensory sensitivity in children with autism spectrum disorders](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3601920/) (https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3601920/)

[Nutrition and Autism Spectrum Disorder: Between False Myths and Real Research-Based Opportunities](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8234602/) (https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8234602/)

[Nutrition Approaches in Autism Spectrum Disorder](https://ijshr.com/IJSHR_Vol.9_Issue.3_July2024/IJSHR18.pdf) (https://ijshr.com/IJSHR_Vol.9_Issue.3_July2024/IJSHR18.pdf)

SUPPORTING SENSORY-FRIENDLY NUTRITION FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN- TOPIC OF THE MONTH

Promoting healthy eating (<https://www.marcus.org/autism-resources/autism-tips-and-resources/promoting-healthy-eating#:~:text=Try%20to%20include%20foods%20from,child%20the%20correct%20serving%20size>)

Picky Eating: 7 Ways to Introduce Your Child with Autism to New Foods (<https://behavioral-innovations.com/blog/introduce-new-foods-to-child-with-autism/>)

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