

### Suggestions for a Selective Eater

- ❖ **It is recommended that if you are worried about your child's eating habits/diet you should seek medical advice to rule out any other issues such as swallowing difficulties, gastrointestinal functions, allergy considerations or nutritional concerns.**
- ❖ We all have our likes and dislikes and everyone has some foods which they cannot bear to eat. Many adults are very conservative about what they will eat and don't like foods mixed together, lumps in foods or sauces. Respect your child's preferences. Plates with separate compartments can prevent food types touching each other.
- ❖ Some children cannot cope with even the smell of the foods that upset them. They may need a very gradual acclimatisation to even having that food on the table. Start by leaving it in the kitchen on the worktop, then with the door open, then on a side table and so on (tiny steps). Unfortunately the environment is full of smells (nice and otherwise!) and the more he is exposed to them the easier it will be to get used to them.
- ❖ Any changes have to be very gradual – it will take months, if not years, to change a child's eating habits, particularly if they are generally resistant to change.
- ❖ **Relax**  
Selective eaters are already anxious about food. Tensing up every time they eat only adds to that anxiety, so make meal times a happy thing. Don't get upset if they want the same thing they've eaten all week instead of that new food you're trying. For now it's important to make them feel safe and satisfy their needs in a way that's less stressful for everybody. Reducing the anxiety surrounding food will help them to relax, which will open a window for you to start working with them on adding new foods. Evidence shows that if parents are stressed this will pass to the child; stress then suppresses the appetite.
- ❖ **Forget what you know about food**  
Start with a clean slate. Ignore that some foods are considered delicious and others boring, that pasta of the same shape tastes the same. Imagine that you know nothing about these foods. Get rid of expectations about what we should enjoy eating, or which properties of foods make them appealing. It's incredibly hard to do, but if you can put yourself in this place mentally then you have a better chance of looking at your child's food selections with an open mind.
- ❖ **Keep a food diary**  
Write down all of the foods that you try over a few weeks - what they looked like, how they were served, whether they were eaten. Look for patterns in the foods that they ate, and try to figure out why they're appealing. Is it a texture thing? Temperature? Routine?
- ❖ **Take small steps towards new foods**  
Once you've figured out what's appealing about the foods they do eat, use that in your approach to new foods. If they like soft foods, try a pear instead of an apple. If they like all white stuff, introduce parsnip. Try the same food in a slightly different shape or colour. Serve the foods they do like at different temperatures. Edge your way towards new foods slowly, making small changes at a time. ❖ **Aim for variety not quantity**

Don't obsess over the number of different foods your child will eat, concentrate instead on covering the food groups. A child who eats only one food from each food group is probably better off than one who eats fifty kinds of fruit but no protein.

❖ **Time it right**

Try introducing new foods at the least stressful times of the day - in the weekend morning when they're rested or set up a picnic while they're relaxed and playing outside.

❖ **Don't offer only new foods**

Selective eaters may never choose to eat a new food even if there's nothing else to eat, so always make sure that at least one preferred food is available. ❖ **Experience**

**food outside of meal times**

Learning about food doesn't just happen when you eat. You can read books about new foods, play games with food, sing songs... introducing the idea of different foods will make them more familiar when the time comes to actually try and eat them.

Involve your child in planning recipes, shopping for food and cooking activities even if they choose not to eat any of it.

❖ **Make meal times comfortable**

Try and eliminate any surrounding sources of anxiety when eating. Reduce sensory demands for hypersensitive children - dim the lights, cut back on cooking smells, don't bang cupboards or pots and pans, avoid clinking cutlery. Have a meal time routine to make things more predictable - wash hands and **sit down at the table together to eat**. Let them be involved in choosing what you're going to eat or how it will be prepared.

❖ **Be inclusive**

Instead of getting frustrated that your selective eater won't eat what everyone else eats, go the other way and try to think of meals for the whole family that include one or more of the foods that your child prefers. If they like plain bread, make sandwiches that everyone can assemble themselves. If they'll eat cubed cheese, baby carrots or crackers you could make up a dip platter for the table that they can serve themselves from. Making them feel involved in the family meal will not only validate the food choices they make for themselves, but it will also expose them to a wider variety of foods and more opportunities to try them.

❖ Avoid adding new foods to your child's plate, instead serve in a separate bowl/plate on the table and allow them to choose if/when they try. Never 'hide' foods in with their favoured foods.

❖ Learning to enjoy new foods is a **process** that we all work through. Consider when you last ate something unfamiliar; Did you look at it?,

Cut a piece off?, Smell it?, Touched it with your finger then your lips, Tasted it with your tongue before putting it in your mouth?, You might even spit it out before then trying and eating a new piece. Each step in this process is a step closer to your child increasing the foods they enjoy. Try not to focus on the final step of eating the foods but instead consider the steps they are making. For example, if your child gagged at the smell of a new



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food wafting from the kitchen but is now happy for the food to be on the table during family mealtimes (even though it is only eaten by you), this is progress.

❖ **The bottom line**

Life with a restrictive eater can be really, really frustrating. But as long as they're eating something, does it really need to be at the top of your list of things to tackle? Sometimes when we stop trying to 'encourage' our children to participate in a new activity, our own anxiety reduces .....and this reduced tension is when children make changes themselves!

**Sensory based ideas which might help**

Crunching, chewing, blowing or sucking all provide firm pressure to the mouth area. If done before meal time they may reduce sensitivity to allow your child to more easily tolerate the many textures involved in foods.

- ❖ Clean teeth with an electric toothbrush just before a meal or massage gums with a babies tooth cleaning cloth.
- ❖ Play a musical wind instrument such as a toy whistle, mouth organ or kazoo.
- ❖ Play blow football with cotton wool balls or a ping-pong ball.
- ❖ Use a vibrating toothbrush
- ❖ Practice chewing gum and blowing bubbles
- ❖ Use crazy straws or thin straws
- ❖ Make and blow pinwheels
- ❖ Make bubble mountains in a bowl with a straw and soapy water
- ❖ Blow gently on each other's faces (see who can blow the longest)
- ❖ Make extreme faces
- ❖ Eat chewy foods fruit roll-ups, bagels, cereal bar, liquorice dried fruit, cheese, gummy sweets with lunch/break)
- ❖ Eat crunchy foods – raw vegetables, fruit such as apples, bread sticks, dry cereal, crisps, Nuts, crackers or popcorn.
- ❖ Use a drinks bottle with a built-in straw.
- ❖ Use a straw to drink yoghurt, fruit puree or fruit smoothies. ❖ Suck sweets, lollipops, frozen fruit or ice cubes.