AUTISM, NUTRITION, AND PICKY EATING…

- Some common behaviors in children with autism can cause problems around food and eating. (Your child may or may not have these behaviors.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEHAVIOR</th>
<th>HOW IT MIGHT RELATE TO CHILDREN’S EATING</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypersensitivity to texture, smell, taste</td>
<td>Refuses to eat foods with specific textures, smells, tastes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need for routine</td>
<td>Child refuses to eat food that looks “different”… or is in a new bowl … or is at a different place at the table</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overstimulated or overwhelmed by the environment</td>
<td>Child is distracted from meal and does not eat</td>
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Typically developing children may need **10** or more exposures to a new food before they will eat it.

… children with autism who are especially sensitive to tastes, textures, smells, or new things may need even more exposures!

Eating (and enjoying food) is **not** as simple as it looks. Eating is an interactive process with many steps:

- **Eats food**
  - Chews and swallows independently

- **Tastes:**
  1. Licks food
  2. Bites food

- **Smells:**
  1. In room
  2. At table, on plate

- **Touches:**
  1. With fingers, hands
  2. With mouth

- **Tolerates:**
  1. Food in room
  2. Food at table
  3. Food on plate

It is natural for children to refuse to eat **some** foods at **some** times. This is one way to show independence and to make decisions.

Picky eating can be a nutrition risk when:
- One or more food groups is excluded from a child’s food pattern
- “Not enough” food leads to weight loss or lack of weight gain
- Fights over eating (or not eating) put a strain on parent-child relationships
**WHAT MAY WORK**

..but not in the long run

“Bribing” your child to eat a food. (“If you eat your vegetables, you can have some candy.”)

Forcing your child to “take a bite” or “have at least one taste.”

**WHY THIS IS NOT IDEAL**

Teaches your child that he/she shouldn’t like vegetables as much as candy, because vegetables are less desirable

Creates negative associations with food and eating. Takes control away from your child.

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**Suggestions for helping your child to enjoy new foods**

Avoid overwhelming your child with too many changes:

1. Keep mealtimes constant. Use the same plates and utensils. Eat at the same place and at the same time.
2. Offer small servings of a few (2-3) foods at one time…avoid offering TOO MUCH FOOD and TOO MANY CHOICES
3. Offer new foods along with foods your child already likes to eat

Introduce foods in forms that are similar to foods your child eats, and make changes gradually.
   - For example, if your child eats crackers, but not sandwiches:
     - First offer sandwiches made with crackers
     - Then, offer sandwiches made on toast
     - Finally, offer sandwiches made with bread

Expect slow changes. Follow your child through the steps of the process…set realistic goals.

For example:

1. Child will let peas stay on plate.
2. Child will pick up peas but not put in mouth.
3. Child will lick peas
4. Child will take a bite of peas

Ask your child’s teacher for help.

1. Pick one “goal food” to offer at snack time and/or lunch. Offer this same food at home.
2. Use non-food reinforcers. Using food as a reinforcer teaches your child to value this food—and can teach your child not to value other foods.
3. Incorporate eating behaviors into your child’s token reward system—a token for a “goal behavior,” such as leaving peas on plate. Remember NOT to use food as the end reward!