

Sensory Strategies: Eating

Children's Therapy Services



Eating

No skill creates more anxiety in a parent than eating or lack of eating. Children who have difficulty with this skill may have a heightened sensitivity to touch, smell or taste. Children who are hypo-sensitive to sensory input may have little awareness of their mouth and how to move their tongue and jaw. They may have a poorly organised suck, swallow, and breath synchrony. Some children have such a need for movement that they may not sit still long enough to eat a meal. Their mealtimes may consist of a mouthful every “lap” around the house. Other children may be at the other extreme. They use the mouth to discover their world. Edible and non-edible items are mouthed, chewed and sometimes swallowed. Developmentally, the mouth is the first area of the body that can interpret sensory feedback accurately. As the hands develop in their ability to accurately interpret sensory input, they take over as the primary “investigators” of the environment.

Sensory Strategies

- Be aware of textures, and temperature of food.
- Encourage the child to “clean” out his mouth with water between mouthfuls of food.
- If your child is orally sensitive implement an oral desensitisation program (ask your therapist about this).
- Apply pressure through the teeth, gums, cheeks and lips to prepare for food.
- Prepare for eating with movement (eg sitting on a bouncing ball, parent’s lap, rocker board, Move ‘n Sit cushion/gel cushion).
- Use a small make-up mirror at the table to help with accuracy in placing the food in the mouth and clean-up after each bite (the visual system can compensate for decreased feedback through the tactile system). If your child is a messy eater, provide pressure touch around the lips and mouth prior to eating and encourage oral motor activity (eg whistling, blowing bubbles) to promote better sensory feedback and build muscle tone for better mouth closure.
- If your child has difficulty using utensils, try weighted handles, which give more sensory feedback and therefore make movements more accurate.

- Try a weighted cup, or a cup with a lid and a straw, if your child often spills the drink.
- Use movement breaks for the active child.
- Try a weighted vest or weighted lap cushion to provide the extra input necessary to sit still.
- Set up a small “café” table at school or day-care or arrange seating at the end of the table, to minimise touch by others.
- Minimise overwhelming auditory and visual input.

Other Strategies

- Work within your child’s tolerance.
- Investigate food allergies, as well as fatigue and appetite.
- Begin with your child’s favourite foods and then increase choices.
- Encourage your child to request the food that he wants (or “seconds”) independently.
- Pre-cut food to encourage independence.
- Modify utensils to compensate for fine motor and bilateral difficulties.
- Modify seating to compensate for developing balance and to promote an upright seating position.

Ideas for Self Help Skills – for children with Sensory Issues

Adapted from ‘Building Bridges through Sensory Integration’ by Ellen Youch, Paula Aquilla & Shirley Suttan

For further information about this service contact:

Children's Occupational Therapy Admin
The Peacock Centre
Brookfields Campus
351 Mill Road
Cambridge
CB1 3DF

Tel: 01223 218065

If you require this information in a different format such as in large print or on audio tape, or in a different language please contact the service on the details above.

If you have any compliments about this service or suggestions for improvements, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 0300 131 1000 (charges may apply depending on your network) or email: ccs-tr.pals@nhs.net.

For free, confidential health advice and information 24 hours a day, 365 days a year please contact NHS 111.