

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Food Play

Some children find touching, tasting and smelling food difficult. It is sometimes called a **sensory eating difficulty or difference**. Children may avoid eating or only want a small range of foods to eat.

These children often:

- Show or tell us what foods they will and won't have
- Eat their favourite foods
- Avoid or refuse new or different foods
- Like their food to look the same
- Like their mealtimes to be the same
- Avoid touching foods
- Gag or vomit near food.
- Do not like the smell of food
- Lick or smell food but not eat it.



Children with these responses to foods need to practice being relaxed around food. Children go through several steps before they want to eat foods.

These steps are:

- **Accepting** new foods or being near food
- **Touching** food
- **Smelling** food
- **Tasting** food
- **Eating** food

This sheet helps you to work through these steps. We call this food play.

Before you start

- You need to be in a calm setting
- Give yourself time – do not rush
- Your child needs to feel relaxed. If they are not, try another time
- Do food play outside of mealtimes.
- The goal is for your child to be relaxed near food –not to eat it
- Do lots of talking play about food each day. Play with toy food in the bath, sing about food and look at food in books. We want children to have fun with food
- It takes time for children to relax around food. It may take 10-15 times for your child to accept a new food at each step.

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Foods at Each Step of Food Play

Some foods are easier for children with sensory differences accept, touch and smell than others. The list below shows the order of food textures most children find easier to accept and touch. Start with the easy ones first.

Easier to touch  Harder to touch	Dry Foods	Dried pasta, lentils, cous cous, cereal, porridge oats, bread
	Dry coated foods	Quavers, wotsits, prawn crackers
	Wet firm foods	Dough (pizza/bread dough)
	Wet tacky foods	Cooked rice, cooked pasta, fruit crumble, treacle
	Wet semi solid foods	Set custard, greek yoghurt, jelly, mousse, angel delight
	Wet liquid foods	Pouring custard, pouring cream, yoghurt
	Mixed texture foods	Pasta and sauce, rice pudding, minestrone soup, yoghurt with lumps

Introduce foods in this order at each step of the food play programme. Your child can work on the activities in small steps.

Check your child is not allergic to any of the food ingredients before you use them in food play.

Step 1 – Accepting Foods



This step will help your child relax near food

• Things to remember	Activities to try
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal is your child lets food near them • Do not ask or pressure your child to eat the food • Keep activities fun • Your child will need to do lots of practice at this step. Make time to do some food play each day. • Keep sessions short. Build up your child's acceptance slowly • Stop if your child shows signs of stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put foods like uncooked pasta, hundreds and thousands near your child • You can put toys they like in the food and model crunching and rolling the toys on them • Do not put any pressure on your child to touch the foods • Allow them to relax and let the food be near them • Work through the dry easy textures to the more difficult textures

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Step 2 - Touching Foods

Start step 2 when your child is happy to be near food.
Step 2 will help your child to touch different foods.

Things to remember	Activities to try
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help your child to try and touch foods with their feet, hands and other parts of the body (e.g. elbows) • Model touching the food yourself – show them it is ok to get messy • Do not put your child’s hands or feet in the food. Let them do this when they are ready • Keep food play fun and exciting • It is ok to be messy – this will really help your child! • Work through the texture order slowly - dry foods to wet foods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll an apple/orange to each other • Roll maltesers through a tube • Make a tower out of cheese blocks/ Weetabix. See if your child knocks it down • Finger paint with chocolate spread/ jam or yoghurt • Use carrot sticks as a paintbrush • Count food items with your child (e.g. chocolate buttons, seeds, raisins). Put them in a bowl • Play hide and seek with food • Let your child help you to make foods, like baking. • Take photographs of your child in the activities. Put them in a book and look at them together

Step 3 - Smelling Foods



Start step 3 when your child is happy touch foods.
There may be some foods they do not want to touch yet. Keep playing at step 2 with these foods.
Step 3 helps your child to bring food closer to your child’s mouth.

Things to remember	Activities to try
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smell is an important part of eating. It can bring strong reactions • Your child may be anxious at this step. Practice little and often • Help your child to be relaxed smelling a range of foods • Smells like apple, cinnamon, vanilla are more relaxing. Try these smells first • Smells like garlic, onions and vinegar are stronger and less relaxing • Do not hold the food directly under your child’s nose • Smell the food yourself. This is a good model for your child. They may copy you as you practise more • Introduce 1-3 new smells at a time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cut items like fruit, chocolate or jelly sweets into small pieces. • Make food jewellery. Put foods on a piece of string. Your child can wear it if they want to or put it on you to wear • Play matching games. Choose 3 foods with a strong smell like oranges, banana, cheesy wotsits. Put them in separate bags. See if your child can match the smell with a photograph.

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Step 4 - Tasting Foods



Try step 4 when your child is happy touching and smelling food.

Try opportunities to taste new foods in food play sessions outside of the mealtimes. Keep your child's mealtimes the same.

Before trying tastes:

- Check your child's speech and language therapy advice.
- Avoid textures your child is not able to manage yet.
- Try food close in flavour and texture to food your child likes
- Try food play with the temperature of food your child likes (e.g. hot or cold)

Things to remember	Activities to try
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not pressure your child to taste the food.• Model tasting food to your child. They may copy you after a while.• Some days your child may want to taste foods. They might not want to on other days. This is ok.• Your child may taste a food by licking it or holding a piece in their mouth. They may chew it.• Your child may spit out the food they have tried. Let them do this in food play.• Have a drink of cold water near your child. This will help them to clear their mouth of a taste if they need to• Tasting food items should be fun. Use foods your child has shown interest in.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try a munchkin fresh food feeder. This lets your child practise tasting food without swallowing it. You can buy these at supermarkets.• Fruit slices are a good choice to begin with. They are naturally sweet.• Try easy to chew foods first like cooked fruits or transitional food textures (e.g. wotsits)• Introduce different flavours and textures as your child is more relaxed• Take turns. Your child could feed you a taste and then swap.• Use teddy/dolly or favourite characters and have a picnic.• Taste the food jewellery or food art – use the activities from the last steps• Take pictures of your child enjoying tasting activities

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Step 5 - Eating Food (swallowing food)

Your child needs to be happy with steps 1-4 first before they will swallow food.

Things to remember	Activities to try
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enjoying food is very important at this step• Every time you try a new food with your child check they are happy with steps 1-4 first• Your child needs to see the food and other people eating it lots of times before they will try it• Do not put pressure on your child to eat. Avoid sentences like 'have a try', 'do you want to taste?'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Model eating food. Your child will be less worried to eat and swallow a food when they see you eating it.• Slowly add foods your child has tasted in food play to their mealtime

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