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For free, confidential health advice and information 24 hours a day, 365 days a year contact NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 or via www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Our Centres:

Bull Plain Health Centre, Hertford: 01992 528102

Danestrete Health Centre, Stevenage: 01438 737782

Peace Children’s Centre, Watford: 01923 470600

Pat Lewis Child Development Centre,
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St Albans Children’s Centre: 01727 891100

Tewin Children’s Development Centre,
QEII Hospital, Welwyn Garden City: 01707 328111

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Sensory Strategies

Eating

Children's Occupational
Therapy Service



Caring for you
... closer to home

This leaflet is designed to give you advice on helping your child overcome any issues with eating. If you have any other questions please talk to your occupational therapist.

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.



Notes

Notes

[Ideas for Self Help Skills – for children with Sensory Issues](#)
Adapted from 'Building Bridges through Sensory Integration'
by Ellen Youch, Paula Aquilla & Shirley Suttan

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.
- Apply pressure through the teeth, gums, cheeks and lips to prepare for food.
- Prepare for eating with movement (e.g. 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 (e.g. 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.
- Some children may prefer to eat somewhere quiet, away from the school canteen, as they are unable to tolerate the sounds.

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/she 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.

