

Sensory needs and food

Occupational Therapists and Speech Therapists treat hundreds of children every day who have difficulties with oral motor control and difficulty regulating sensory input in the mouth

These are the children who have difficulties with **speech, eating, are constantly putting things in their mouth, drooling, or never eating anything besides applesauce and yogurt.**

Oral motor toys:

- whistles
- blow toys
- blo pens
- straws (ie. playing hockey by blowing cotton balls or splatter painting by blowing on paint using a straw etc.)
- sweet and sour candies and gum
- weird and different foods
- making food into toys or animals
- oral massagers
- textured teething rings or spoons
- bubbles
- chewy tubing and edible play doh

Activities for Home and School

- Allow your fussy eaters to explore and play with their food.** This will allow them to experience different textures through the tactile system which will ultimately help. Due to their oral hypersensitivity, they will feel "safer" exploring textures with their hands first, rather than their mouths. It is much less threatening and will lead to a better overall response.
- Grind up "real" foods;** as many of the foods the family is eating as possible! This way, they may tolerate the texture better and begin getting used to the tastes. You can also add their favourite condiment to the ground up food to make it more palatable and "smoother".
- Use a "Fresh Food Feeder";** to help a child try new flavours or to introduce regular whole foods, without the risk of choking.
- Once you find a particularly successful food, try introducing similar foods.** For example, if the child likes a particular brand of frozen pizza, then try; other brands, other toppings on the preferred brand, another "style" (i.e., thin crust, French bread, stuffed crust etc.), or try a variety of homemade pizzas using different "crusts" (i.e., frozen bread dough, pre-made pizza crusts, refrigerated crusts, English muffins, bagels, or pita bread).
- Try providing distractions while they are eating** such as conversations, favourite stories, poems, pictures, songs, relaxing music, a toy he can hold or squeeze, or anything you can think of... just try it and see what works. Or "bribe" them with these things... they can only get or do something after they takes a bite, chews it, or swallows it etc. (making it realistic to where he is at, only the NEXT logical step)
- Set up a reward system.** Use tokens, reward stickers, pennies, etc. and reward your child for trying a new food (even if he gags or can not eat more than one bite). They can then trade them in for a new toy, or any kind of reward you set up. (For example, my daughter was so bad we set up a reward system of a new bike after she added

10 new foods to her repertoire). Find a reward system which works for both you and your child that will encourage them to try new foods, tastes, and textures. Once you find a food, get them to eat more of it and begin gradually adding it to his usual repertoire.

- **Give the child as much control as possible... give them a choice** of two new foods to try. Let them know they only need to eat one bite to see if they like it. Praise them for trying, even if it doesn't "stay down". Do this **FIRST**, and then they can have his preferred meal. (It is important you do it first while the child is most hungry and while there is less food in their stomach in case they gag). Find out the best time of day for **YOUR** child to try something new... breakfast, lunch, snack, or dinner. When are they most agreeable, hungry, willing, awake, etc?
- **Pay attention to textures!** Fussy eaters with oral defensiveness are infamous for only being able to tolerate one or two food textures or temperatures. Make sure you try to introduce new foods to ultimately include: hot, cold, and neutral temperatures for food and drinks, pureed food, smooth, chunky, hard, soft, crunchy, "slippery", sticky, and mixed textures. If there is **NO** wheat allergy, you can increase and change textures by adding a 1/4 tsp. of wheat germ per 4 oz. of pureed food. If tolerated, for a few days, add another 1/4 tsp. to the same amount. If **NOT** tolerated (gagging, choking), wait a few days or week and try again.
- **When brushing his teeth, brush tongue and cheeks with just water** then brush teeth normally. Use regular or vibrating toothbrushes. Vibration is best if they will tolerate it
- **Give your picky eaters free reign of the condiments...** whatever it takes to get them to eat it! (i.e., ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, salad dressing, spaghetti sauce, barbecue sauce, salt, pepper, creamy soups, gravy, etc.) Eventually you can begin fading out the condiments, using less and less, each time as he begins to get used to the food.
- **Praise, Praise, Praise... positive reinforcement! No punishment!** If they did more than the time before they have accomplished something. If they played with it, smelled it, licked it, tasted it, chewed it and spit it out, or actually swallowed it (with or without gagging), then **praise them for what they did do, do not punish them for what they didn't do.**
- **Give your picky eaters 1/2 of a freeze pop before they try a new food.** The cold will help "numb" and desensitize their mouth.