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Picky Eating and Tummy Troubles: How to Improve Mealtime for Your Child

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It happened again. My son, Jordan, who has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) made a scene at a restaurant. I even researched this place to make sure it had macaroni and cheese. Apparently, it was not exactly how he had wanted, and he started gagging and crying in front of everyone. I was so embarrassed, and at a loss for what to do. Jordan won't eat anything but macaroni and cheese, chicken nuggets and plain bagels: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. If I try to give him something else, he throws a fit. I know kids are picky eaters, but this is different. I am starting to worry about his health, especially because of some of the gastrointestinal (GI) issues he already has.

Picky Eating

Many children with ASD have difficulty with eating certain foods or may have very specific food preferences ¹. Research has shown that there are a variety of reasons why individuals with autism may have limited food choices. According to several studies, children may be “choosy” about certain types of food because they prefer sameness in their meals ^{2,3}. Most children with ASD may also be severe picky eaters because they are overly sensitive to a food's color, texture, smell, taste, or temperature ⁴. For example, some children with ASD will only eat white-colored foods or foods that are soft, like pudding or mashed potatoes. Their sensitivity may be exhibited by tantruming, gagging, or even vomiting if a parent or caregiver attempts to give them a new food ^{5,6,7,8}.

Mealtime Environment

Not only can sensory characteristics of the food be a challenge, but also the sensory characteristics of the eating environment may cause difficulty for a child with ASD. If an environment is too noisy for a child who is overwhelmed by loud sounds, simply eating a meal may be a challenge ³. A child with ASD may also have difficulty with eating because he or she may have trouble sitting still for long periods of time ³. Lastly, socializing with others is often a large component of mealtime ⁹. Because social and communication concerns are characteristic of ASD, your little one may be selective of foods or throw a tantrum as a way to avoid or a means to cope with an anxiety-provoking situation.

What can I do to help?

Fortunately, there are several evidence-based treatment methods that can be effective in helping children with ASD overcome their severe picky eating. Because food and mealtime is a source of anxiety for children with ASD who are severe picky eaters, therapy includes hierarchical exposure to the anxiety-provoking stimulus (a food the child dislikes) with encouragement until the child is eventually desensitized to the stimulus ⁸. First, the therapist, along with the parent, will identify the reasons why particular foods are highly desirable to the child and why other foods may not be. For this first step, it is important to determine if the foods that the child likes and dislikes are based on temperature, color, taste, smell, or texture. Then, the child will be exposed to foods that he or she prefers most in terms of their sensory characteristics, followed by foods that he or she has more difficulty with ⁸.

Tummy Troubles

Gastrointestinal (GI) issues often go hand-in-hand with food selectivity and eating difficulties in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Several children with ASD are at higher risk for GI problems, and many suffer

from chronic diarrhea, constipation, and abdominal pain¹⁰. Although research is not yet conclusive, some studies have shown that children with ASD may act out or behave inappropriately in response to gastrointestinal distress¹⁰. Some children with ASD may express GI distress as repetitive or self-injurious behaviors, irritability, tantrums, and disturbed sleep patterns¹⁰. As children with ASD may be more likely to experience gastrointestinal symptoms than children without ASD, it is important to be aware of your child's eating habits and to be sensitive to possible tummy troubles associated with mealtime¹¹.

Sunfield Center psychologists are available to help identify and treat severe picky eating in children and adolescents as well as other challenges faced by families whose children have mental health needs. To schedule an appointment, please call us at (734) 222-9277. For more information about Sunfield Center please visit our website at sunfieldcenter.com.

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