

# Picky Eaters

## Handout 3: Sensory issues

**DISCLAIMER:** *These handouts have been produced for children who are having difficulty in eating a range of foods. It is expected that any strategies used within these leaflet are adapted to individual children and that any queries are discussed with a relevant health professional for that child prior to being tried. This information is not for children who have any physical reason that makes eating difficult.*

### Think Sensory

Eating is one of the most complex sensory tasks we do as humans. If your child has some sensory sensitivity and is a picky eater, it is likely that some of their difficulties with food are sensory.

We all take information in through our senses (visual, smell, touch, taste, sound, movement) to help us understand the world around us. When we are anxious or stressed, our senses become heightened and can result in bigger behavioural reactions. An example of this is if we hear an unexpected sound in our house late at night, we can become very sensitive to any other smaller sounds that may be going on that we previously weren't aware of- for children, this reaction can be around food.

Sensory issues are usually much wider than just a response to taste. For example, gagging at the sight of a food before eating it is a visual stimulus, enjoying crunchy food is about jaw movement and becoming upset with messy hands is a touch response.

As adults we usually unconsciously know how food will feel and taste in our mouths before we eat it. It is easy to underestimate how difficult it can be to try new foods. For example – we know biting into a cherry tomato that it is going to 'pop' in our mouths so we don't need to think about it. But, if it is your first time, this will be a surprise. Equally, if you are expecting something to taste sweet and instead it is salty, this can be quite a shock. That doesn't mean we don't *like* that taste, but it can mean that it wasn't what we expected as our brain had prepared us for a sweet.

We will all try to smell, look or tentatively taste new foods we are unsure about. It is natural and healthy that children are cautious of what they put in their mouths and a normal part of this is exploring the food with their other senses first. This should be a messy process!

The below tables explains the senses, signs that your child may be struggling with the sense and quick tips.



Sense		
Visual	<b>Explanation</b>	How food looks – is it the right shape, size, colour, texture. Branding! Red packet instead of green could provoke stress.
	<b>Signs to watch for</b>	Sensitive to packaging – knows if it's a different brand through looking at packet and objects. Struggles when food is not the same shape, e.g. cut in half Upset when not the right colour, e.g. toast has to be a specific amount of brown.
	<b>Quick tips</b>	- Everything out of packaging. - Work on familiar foods and changing visual properties slightly in front of the child, e.g. cookie cutters in toast.

Smell	Explanation	Cooking smells from kitchen Smells of food when in child's space
	<b>Signs to watch for</b>	Covers nose Gags with smell Complains about smell
	<b>Quick tips</b>	- Use napkins to cover up food bowls and have quick 'peeps' - Use positive language around smells – explain what smells are. - gradually bring food closer – start with foods well out of a child's space and work closer over several mealtimes.

Touch	Explanation	The feel of foods on fingers and when in the mouth. Smooth or rough, meltable or chewy, hard or soft, crunchy or squashy. Can also be the feel of cutlery, chairs, foot stool.
	<b>Signs to watch for</b>	Limited diet to textures – may only eat squashable food, purees or meltable food, or crunchy hard foods. Explores food with hands first, or refuses to touch food or get messy. Over crams mouth to feel food Dislikes or likes certain temperatures like ice, hot or warm food. Pulls face with metal spoon or when cutlery is on teeth.
	<b>Quick tips</b>	- Encourage touch exploration – use a utensil to help if child won't touch with fingers. Crunching and smashing foods with hands is great to learn about food. - Try plastic cutlery if metal is a problem. - Use a cushion on chair if uncomfortable touch. - Don't wipe a child's face and hands at the table if they don't like this. Move to a sink to avoid linking unpleasant experiences to the table. - Use mirrors to see in mouth

<b>Movement</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	How stable the child is when they eat. Sitting at the table in a chair.
	<b>Signs to watch for</b>	Doesn't sit at table for long – eats running around. Fidgety, legs dangling or kicking out, legs folded underneath them
	<b>Quick tips</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do a movement activity before needing to sit at the table.</li> <li>- Try a weighted lap pad (can be a pillow case full of dried rice ~ 5% plus 2lbs of a child's bodyweight)</li> <li>- Ensure feet are supported – theraband can be fun between chair legs for fiddly feet.</li> <li>- Wobble cushions or sitting on gym balls can be helpful for fidgety children, but only use these with children with good core muscle strength otherwise the balance challenge will be too distracting from eating.</li> </ul>

<b>Sound</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	Sounds of foods in our heads when we eat. Sounds of others eating. Sounds in the environment. Sound of cutlery on plates.
	<b>Signs to watch for</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Covering ears, cringing with noises</li> <li>- Becoming irritated or distracted by background noises or others eating</li> <li>- Not eating crunchy food or trying to eat them slowly and softly.</li> <li>- Disliking eating in the canteen or hall at school.</li> </ul>
	<b>Quick tips</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ear defenders can be helpful for children who need to eat somewhere noisy as a one off, but not as a long term strategy. They can help in school or restaurants.</li> <li>- Background music can help cover up some less preferred sounds.</li> <li>- Being able to eat in quieter places, e.g. a classroom or smaller space than a big hall.</li> <li>- Soft furnishings absorb noise so if a room is particularly echoey, pillows and rugs can help the noise.</li> </ul>

<b>Taste</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	The flavour of foods, whether it is salty, spicy, sweet, sour, bitter or umami (savory flavour).
	<b>Signs to watch for</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Spitting food out after trying it</li> <li>- Wiping tongue</li> <li>- Drinking to 'take the taste away'</li> <li>- Only objecting to food once it is in their mouth on their tongue.</li> <li>- Covering everything in the same sauce, e.g. ketchup so everything tastes the same</li> <li>- Not being interested in food unless it has a big flavour</li> </ul>
	<b>Quick tips</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If an aversion to food happens before it has been tried, it is not related to taste</li> <li>- Tasting things can be a very gradual process of touching a food then licking a finger to get the flavour, getting flavour on lip and tasting, or licking the food.</li> <li>- Flavours can be changed by using sauces and flavourings – chilli sauce can make things more exciting if children want 'big flavours' and aren't so interested in blander foods. Equally, ketchup can be a helpful reassurance if children are struggling to try new food.</li> </ul>

- Dipping and licking can be a good way to try new flavours without the pressure to eat.
- Allowing your child to spit something out – having a cup or napkin for spitting food into.

#### What to do next

Try reading the relevant handouts:

- Picky Eating Handout 2: How and what children eat
- Picky Eating Handout 3: Sensory issues
- Picky Eating Handout 4: Practical strategies

If you try strategies consistently in these handouts without any success, please discuss your concerns with your child's GP, health visitor or paediatrician. They will be able to refer on to relevant professionals if they feel the level of need is significant.

At present, the NHS provides support for children who are picky eaters that have a physical oral development difficulty, concerns around the safety of their swallow or not gaining weight or growing. If children have none of these issues but continue to be picky eaters, there is no NHS funded service to support picky eating.

#### Further Reading

Ellyn Satter Institute - <http://ellynsatterinstitute.org/hf/howtofeed.php>

Range of Ellyn Satter's books such as 'Child of Mine: Feeding your child with love and good sense'.

#### References

Toomey, K.A. 2010. Picky Eaters vs. Problem Feeders: The SOS Approach to Feeding.

Satter, E. 2000. *Child of Mine: Feeding your child with love and good sense*. Bull Publishing.

## Contact details

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**If you wish to make any comments or to ask about any research evidence used to write this leaflet, please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0300 019 8499, write to the Patient Experience Team (address above) or email [patientexperienceteam@uhd.nhs.uk](mailto:patientexperienceteam@uhd.nhs.uk)**

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