



Sensory Processing Service

General Mealtimes Principles



Caring, Learning
& Growing Together



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General Feeding Principles

General Feeding Principles are developed to be implemented at family meals to work on the following goals:

1. Increase the variety of preferred foods while learning new skills sets
2. Increase exposure to non-preferred foods (foods which other family members are eating)
3. Establishing a mealtime structure and routine

*When implementing General Feeding Strategies, select only 1 to 2 principles at a time based on the priority of the need at the time.

Role Modelling:

- Model positive/ preferred feeding behaviours during family meals.
- Be mindful of consequence – children learn through observing others and will adjust their behaviour according to the perceived outcome.
- Take the focus from your child and make food the focus of the meal – discuss the sensory properties of the food in a positive or neutral way. For example, *if the food is spicy/sweet, describe the food as a “big flavour” after trying the food yourself.*



- Support your child to climb the Steps-to-Eating by having the same foods as your child and engaging in playful exploration of the food.
- Make the food fun! Make meal times a safe place to touch, taste, lick, spit and explore the food. For example, *'can a carrot stick become a drum stick or bunny ears/teeth?'*
- Involve your child in meal preparation. For example, *Watch, smell, play with food throughout the process, and observe how food changes form as it is prepared.*
- Its recommended for your child to stay at the table throughout the duration of the meal, even if they are no longer eating. Allow your child to move the plate away if they need to.
- Refrain from punishment – an increase in adrenalin causes appetite loss.

Structured Meal and Snack Times:

- Use the same place and environmental cues (i.e. seating, placemat). Ensure environmental cues are plain so that the food is the most interesting thing (i.e. plain placemat).
- Use a plain placemat as a designated cue that sets time, place, and personal space.
- • Drinking helps to re-start eating. Allow a drink break, but not too soon during the meal, as your child may fill up on fluid to avoid eating.
- Avoid cross-contaminating foods by serving foods as a family/ buffet style, rather than serving already on the plate.



- Set the expectation that every family member will take one piece of each food, whether they eat it or not. This increases your child's proximity and exposure to tolerance.
- Introduce a 'learning plate' in the middle of the table and allow your child to place foods on their placement or learning plate if they are intolerable.
- Create a routine to meal times and snacks. Routines should have a clear beginning, middle and end to build a new behaviour. For example:
Beginning - verbal 5 minute warning prior to the meal; have a transition activity (i.e. washing hands) on the way to the table; sit at the table.
Middle - serve family/buffet style meal by passing around foods and role modelling.
End – 'clean up' time (approximately 30 minutes after commencement); throw/blow one piece of each food into the bin, dishes in sink etc.
- Offer food every 2.5-3 hours to avoid 'grazing'. Grazing can be problematic as it takes the edge off hunger without consuming a full meal.
- Present foods in manageable bite size for your child's skill level, not age.
- • Provide foods that are more difficult for your child to manage at their best time of day. For example, scrambled eggs may be a good dinner (less skill required), even though they are more typically thought of as a breakfast meal.



- Offer at least one preferred food at every meal, amongst several other foods on the table for exposure.
- Allow your child to taste a food and spit it out into a napkin or container.
- Start the 'clean up' process approximately 20-30 minutes after sitting down for a meal. Your child may become more fatigued and at risk of burning more calories than they are consuming for meal times that are longer than this.

Positive Reinforcement:

- Verbal praise is an effective positive reinforcement tool.
- Praise other family members (and self) eating to take focus solely away from your child.
- Praise your child for any desired food behaviour (i.e. touching and smelling).
- Playful exploration of food is reinforcing and touching the food helps desensitise.
- Where possible, avoid over-glorifying and over-vilifying preferred and non-preferred foods (i.e. "if you eat food A, you get food B") as this puts your child at risk of avoiding a preferred food, further limiting their diet.

□ Cognitive Strategies:

- This principle refers to engaging with your child at their level to help them to understand the food and their bodies
- Meet your child at their cognitive level.



- For children between the following age brackets, consider the following strategies:

Birth – 2 years old

- Take the language down; less is more
- Children between this age bracket learn best through their senses and playful exploration.
- Teach the mechanics of food. For example, show a whole strawberry, “chop, chop” the strawberry to make “juice”.

Between 2 – 5 (up to 7) years old

- Children in this stage of development are magical thinkers! Don't fight magic with logic, fight magic with magic. For example, broccoli can be a tree, or a fairy wand.
- Make simple cognitive links in comparing new foods to something they already eat (i.e. similar qualities they share).
- Teach kids where their molars are and that they are required in chewing.

Between 5/7 – 9 (up to 11) years old

- Children of this age are becoming logical thinkers.
- Challenge their black and white thinking. For example, “*it seems like you're trying to taste with your eyes, but your eyes don't have taste buds*”.

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sensoryprocessinghub.humber.nhs.uk
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