

# Sensory Issues Around Eating

Children's Dietetic Service



## Introduction

We all process sensory information differently and this can affect our reactions to food and eating. What smells good to one person can be unpleasant for another. What feels comfortably warm to some may be too hot for others. Therefore, telling your child to 'eat it as is tastes good' or 'don't be silly it is not too hot' may not be the case for them.

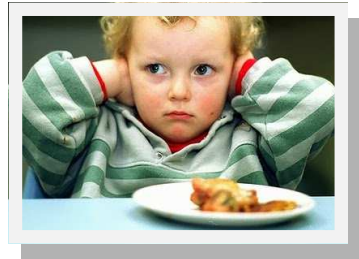
A child whose mouth is very sensitive may only be able to stand bland or soft food. A child whose mouth sensations are dulled may crave very strong tasting or crunchy foods to give them some stimulation.

## Sensory Issues Around Eating

It is important to consider how we use our senses when eating and drinking:

- **Vision** - Eating starts with our eyes. We need to be able to see where the food is and we also look at the shape, colour and presentation of our food.
- **Touch** - We touch food with our hands, body and face so that we can move the food from the plate and into our mouths. We have to be able to feel the food as we put it into our mouth and chew it. It also tells us the shape and texture of the food and whether it is hot or cold.
- **Smell** - We smell food as it is being prepared and on the table. We explore how it smells as we bring it towards our mouth.
- **Taste** - As the food goes into our mouth, we taste it.

- **Hearing** - We listen to how the food sounds as we eat it, particularly if we eat something hard and crunchy.
- **Body awareness** - We need to know how much force to use when biting and chewing different foods and when our mouths are full / empty.
- **Balance** - We need to be able to keep ourselves and our head upright and in the correct position when eating.



## Sensory Issues

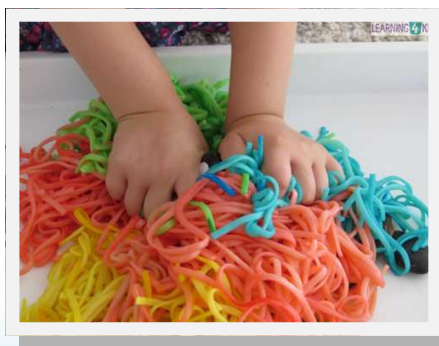
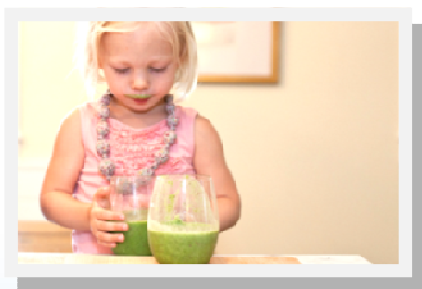
It is important to remember that none of our senses work alone; they all work together and you can have processing difficulties in one or more areas. When we are stressed or anxious, our senses can become heightened and result in bigger behavioural reactions.

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

The tables below explain the senses, signs that your child may be struggling and some tips to help:

## Vision

What does this involve?	How food looks - is it the right shape, size, colour, texture? How the food is packaged and branded.
Signs to watch out for	<b>Your child:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Knows if it is a different brand through looking at packaging or the food itself.</li><li>• Struggles when food is not the same shape e.g. cut up differently.</li><li>• Gets upset when food is not the right colour e.g. food may be darker due to being cooked longer e.g. toast.</li></ul>
Tips to help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where possible, take food out of packaging.</li><li>• Work on familiar foods and making small changes in front of the child e.g. using a cookie cutter on toast.</li><li>• Introduce a tiny portion of a different brand next to the acceptable brand so the child can see the difference.</li></ul>



## Touch

What does this involve?	The feel of foods on the hand and in the mouth e.g. smooth or rough, dissolvable or chewy, hard or soft, crunchy or squashy. May also involve the feel of cutlery or seating.
Signs to watch out for	<b>Your child:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May only eat certain textures e.g. crunchy or hard foods or purees or squashable foods.</li><li>• May explore food with hands first or refuse to touch food at all or get messy.</li><li>• Over crams their mouth to feel food.</li><li>• Dislikes or prefers certain temperatures like ice, hot or warm food.</li><li>• Pulls a face with metal cutlery or when cutlery is on teeth.</li></ul>
Tips to help	<p>Touching is very important - if a child crunches, squashes or touches food with their fingers, their brain has more information about what it would feel like in the mouth.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gently encourage touch exploration - use a utensil to help if your child won't use their fingers.</li><li>• Use a different type of messy play.</li><li>• Try plastic cutlery if metal is a problem.</li><li>• Use a cushion on their chair.</li><li>• Move away from the table to wipe a child's hands and face if they don't like it - this avoids linking an unpleasant experience to the table.</li><li>• Use mirrors to see in the mouth.</li></ul>

## Smell

What does this involve?	Cooking smells in the kitchen Smells of food in your child's space
Signs to watch out for	<b>Your child:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Covers nose.</li><li>• Gags with smells.</li><li>• Complains about smells.</li></ul>
Tips to help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Open a window in the kitchen to get rid of cooking smells.</li><li>• Use napkins to cover up food bowls and have quick 'peeps'.</li><li>• Use positive language around smells - explain what smells are.</li><li>• Gradually bring food closer - start with foods well out of a child's space and work closer over several meal times.</li></ul>



## Taste

What does this involve?	The flavour of foods - is it salty, spicy, sweet, sour, bitter or umami (savoury flavour)
Signs to watch out for	<b>Your child:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Spits out food after trying it.</li><li>• Wipes their tongue.</li><li>• Drinks to 'take the taste away'.</li><li>• Only objects to food once it is in their mouth on their tongue.</li><li>• Covers all foods in the same sauce e.g. ketchup so everything tastes the same.</li><li>• Is not interested in food unless it has a strong flavour.</li></ul>
Tips to help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learning to taste foods can be a very gradual process - start by touching a food, then licking a finger to get the flavour, getting flavour on the lip and tasting or licking the food.</li><li>• Flavours can be changed by using sauces or flavourings e.g. chilli sauce can make foods more exciting for children who prefer big flavours. Covering a new food with ketchup can reassure children who usually like this with their food.</li><li>• Dipping and licking can be a good way to try new flavours without the pressure to eat.</li></ul>

## Hearing

What does this involve?	<p>The sound of food in our head when we eat and the sound of the others eating.</p> <p>The sound of the environment around eating or of cutlery on plates.</p>
Signs to watch out for	<p><b>Your child:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May cover their ears or cringe with noises</li><li>• Becomes irritated or distracted by background noises and other people eating.</li><li>• Does not eat crunchy hard foods or tries to eat them very slowly and softly.</li><li>• May dislike eating in the canteen or hall at school.</li></ul>
Tips to help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Background music may help to cover up some less preferred sounds.</li><li>• Being able to eat in a quieter place, often a smaller space.</li><li>• Soft furnishings can absorb noise so rugs and curtains can help in an echoey room</li><li>• Ear defenders can be helpful in one off situations when the noise issue cannot be addressed e.g. in restaurants.</li></ul>





## Body awareness and movement

What does this involve?	Eating environment - type of seating, height of table
Signs to watch out for	<b>Your child:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Doesn't sit at the table for long, eats moving around.</li><li>• Fidgets with legs dangling or kicking out or has legs folded beneath them.</li></ul>
Tips to help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do a movement activity before needing to sit at the table .</li><li>• Try to get the seating right - children need their feet supported and the table in between chest and tummy button height.</li><li>• Try a weighted lap pad.</li><li>• Ensure feet are supported - a theraband can be fun between chair legs for fiddly feet. A foot stool can be made from old catalogues or magazines taped together.</li><li>• Start with small expectations - encourage your child to sit at the table for a short time with plans to gradually extend the time by a minute at a time.</li></ul>



**Notes:**

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