

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services & Administration for Children & Families

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HEAD START DISABILITIES SERVICES NEWSLETTER

 NATIONAL CENTER ON Quality Teaching and Learning



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Read About It



Easier Mealtimes for Young Children with Autism

Robbie is 3½ years old. He was diagnosed with autism at the age of 22 months. Janice and Robert, his parents, are concerned. Since his first birthday, Robbie has primarily eaten four foods: Wheat toast with butter, chicken nuggets, saltines, and apple slices. He will not stay at the table, but walks around the room while taking food off his blue partitioned plate. Recently, he has stopped drinking milk and is eating less. His child care provider and preschool teacher want to help.

Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have unique feeding difficulties. These issues include sensitivity to texture, temperature, and strong taste; selecting foods from only one or two food groups; food allergies; and gastrointestinal issues like acid reflux or constipation.

Robbie's teachers and parents were able to make several behavioral interventions at home and school. Read how they did it in [Time to Eat: Improving Mealtimes for Young Children with Autism](#) from Young Exceptional Children. The article shows how to assess current behaviors, create an eating plan, and then modify the environment for children with severe feeding difficulties. The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and Sage Publications have allowed free access to this article through April 30, 2015.

Take a Look

A Little Help from Mealtime Modifications

Small changes at mealtimes can increase children's interest and participation. These videos from [Project CONNECT: The Center to Mobilize Early Childhood Knowledge](#) show children who are able to participate during mealtimes by using modifications. In the [first video](#), a little boy uses a voice output device to request spaghetti during lunch time. In the [second video](#), a little girl points to a picture of what she wants at a restaurant.

Try It Out!

Three Great Ideas

How can you support children with autism during mealtimes? This month we asked an early childhood autism specialist for her three favorite tips, and this is what she said:

1. **Create "taste stations."** Choose a time that isn't during a mealtime. Set up the taste station with foods that have been chosen by the focus child's family and special education team. Provide toys that the focus child has a lot of interest in. Ask the child



to "First take a taste, then you can play with (*preferred toy*)."

When the child takes a taste, give him or her lots of verbal praise and allow her access to the preferred toy. Repeat the instructions of "First take a taste, then you can play with (*preferred toy*)."

Again, when the child takes a taste, give him or her lots of verbal praise and access to her preferred toy. Repeat this process until the child takes a taste of each food, or until he or she indicates being finished with the activity. If needed, make the sessions short in the beginning and then work up to longer sessions with more foods. If other children show interest in this activity, allow them to join in. If the child does not take bites of the new foods, you may need to have him or her start with touching or smelling the foods instead.

2. **Pair new foods with preferred foods.** Some children choose to eat only crackers or a certain shape of pasta. Try dipping the cracker in a *very* small amount of jam, cream cheese, or beans and see if the child will still tolerate it. If the child does, try increasing the amount of dip, or dip the cracker in different foods. If a child eats only one pasta shape, try introducing a very small amount of a different shape into the preferred pasta. If that is tolerated, try adding more new pasta or a very small amount of tomato sauce.
3. **Slowly build food tolerance.** First, put a new food on the table, then on a napkin near the child, then on the child's plate. Next, help the child to smell the new food or touch it with their finger or mouth. Next, encourage the child to lick or bite the new food. Go slow with these steps. Offer lots of praise, access to preferred activities, and continued patience throughout the process.

Improve Your Practice

Check out a 15-minute In-service Suite from the NCQTL: Environmental Support

The training suite [Environmental Support](#) helps teachers and trainers learn how to make small changes to ongoing activities to increase a child's level of participation. As one of 10 professional development suites on curriculum modifications, it includes resources, tips, and tools. Check out the [Tips for Teachers](#) for quick reference ideas on using pictures, choosing peer pairs and groupings, and modifying the daily schedule. You'll find it on the [National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning \(NCQTL\)](#) portal on the [Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center](#).

Families Too!

Mayhem at Mealtime?

After you create healthy meals, what can you do besides just hope that children will eat what's on their plates? For children with special needs, it might take extra planning (and patience) to get mealtimes to run more smoothly. Here are some tips from experts:



- **Seating:** Make sure your child sits comfortably in his chair. If his feet don't reach the floor, place a box or carton under his feet so he can feel a solid surface while eating. Provide a special cushion (with a washable cover) for your child to use during mealtimes, unless it adds more distraction. For infants and toddlers, make sure they're sitting comfortably and that their high-chair or booster seat is positioned correctly.
- **Clear expectations:** How would you like mealtimes to go? Take small steps toward that goal. Ask yourself, do I want my child to sit at the table during meals or can I allow him to stand? How long would I like him to stay at the table? Do I want him to taste each new food, or could I allow him to smell or touch it first?

- **Create routines:** Consistent routines help children learn to predict the order of activities in their day. Create pictures of the dinner routine; while cooking, let your child listen to music; and after dinner, read your child a book.

Special Events

The **42nd Annual National Head Start Association (NHSA) Conference and Expo** takes place in Washington, DC, at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, on March 29–April 2.

The **12th Annual National Training Institute on Effective Practices** takes place in St. Petersburg, FL, at the Renaissance Vinoy Resort and Golf Club, on April 22–24.

We Want to Hear from You!

The Head Start Disabilities Services Newsletter is produced monthly by NCQTL. Email Kristin Ainslie at ncqtl@uw.edu to submit questions or suggestions for future newsletter topics.

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