autism wellbeing

Our Senses: Gustatory

We use our mouths to taste things and our brains process the sensations. Some people find certain tastes repulsive, bitter, or unpleasant, even though to other people they seem quite bland. Other children may not notice the taste of strong spices or flavours and crave strongly seasoned food. For some children it is not about taste, but the texture, colour or smell.

Children can often have strong preferences for particular foods, and they may experience distress when familiar brands aren't available because they experience the difference in a distressing way. This has created challenges for many families during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some children may eat non-edible items and not discriminate between food and non-food. Many children explore and learn about the world using their mouths.

Mealtimes and feeding are emotive subjects: They involve complex social skills, physical skills like using cutlery, and table manners. Parental stress can add to a child's emotional dysregulation if the child picks up on it.

- Coping with different textures or tastes can be experienced as distressing. Eating out can be challenging because foods that are enjoyed at home feel unfamiliar.
- If a child has poor proprioception or weak tactile awareness, they may find it difficult to coordinate chewing, swallowing, and breathing. It may be helpful to use chewing gum, or drink smoothies through a straw or eat crisps to help create sensation in the mouth before a meal.
- Using an electric toothbrush before meals can also create sensation and may make the experience of eating easier. It may also be helpful to create sensation in the mouth prior to wearing a face covering or mask.
- For children that like to bite, teething rings (chilled in the fridge) can be useful. For older children and adults, sensory toys like chewbuddies can be used.
- Take familiar snacks with you when you go out so your child will have something they enjoy.
- If you have concerns, speak to your GP or health visitor. Often a child will have a logical reason for going off their food. This could be due to ill health, or teething, a change in ingredients, a noisy environment. It can feel like detective work trying to find out!
- Sometimes it can help to introduce a new food as an activity in its own right, rather than at a mealtime. This may reduce distress because mealtimes can be quite complex social and sensory occasions for autistic people. Trying new food as a fun activity with no judgment can be less overwhelming. Exploring food can be about touching and smelling it and not just about putting it in their mouth.