

# Picky Eater Tidbits



**CHALLENGES:** *My tot is a very picky eater.*

*My tot gets upset when offered many foods.*

*My tot gags when some foods are presented.*

## DID YOU KNOW?

*"You can think of sensations as 'food for the brain'; they provide the knowledge needed to direct the body and mind" (Ayres, 2005, p.6). Therefore, providing a sensory buffet may help tots with their nutritional diet. One could say sensations are 'brain food' that help prepare your tot for table food. Eating right fuels the body for playing, learning, and growing. Some tots with over-responsivity do not like the feel, taste, sight, or smell of foods. They may be especially sensitive around their mouth or hands.*

*If your tot is over or under-responsive to smell, it could affect his taste. Most taste perception is dependent on the perception and interpretation of smell sensations which go right from the nose to the part of the brain that is involved in emotions and inner drive. That explains why eating can be such an emotional adventure for tots!*

## SAFETY FIRST!

Some tots who had pain from reflux, or surgery as infants can develop **over-responsivity** and have feeding issues. They may or may no longer appear to have reflux, yet refuse to eat because of the association with food and pain. Always consider your tot's medical conditions, physical abilities, allergies, intolerances, food sensitivities, oral motor skills, and special diets. Keep up-to-date with your tot's recommended nutritional guidelines (American Dietetic Association, 2007), and speak with your tot's doctor, nutrition specialist, or registered dietitian with expertise with children who have special challenges for details specific to your tot. Ensure safety and supervise closely. Never force feed your tot!

**CONSIDER THIS...** *"A 'food jag' is a short-term eating habit in which toddlers select the same food for every meal" (American Dietetic Association, 2007). 'Food jags' are a short term part of typical development, and often go away if a big deal is not made of them. Keep a food diary to track what your tot is eating. Keep in mind that you are responsible for what and how much food is presented, but your tot is responsible for what and how much he eats. Remember, it can take 8-10 exposures (Birch, 1996) before a tot accepts a new food, so don't give up!*

*Consistency with feeding times and approaches is important to success. Praise your tot for trying new foods, and withhold expressions of frustration. Introducing new foods at play time or at the beginning of a meal when your tot is hungriest may be helpful. Playing with your tot before he eats gives him the attention he seeks outside of mealtimes and can help improve positive behavior at meals.*



## Movement Tools

- Encourage active play for your *sensory seeking* tot before sitting for a meal, and wait until the meal is served to call him to the table.
- If needed, give your tot movement breaks every few minutes during meals, or allow him to kneel or stand while eating.

- Put an air cushion or partially deflated beach ball on your tot's high chair, booster seat or school chair to allow for 'wiggles' without leaving the table.
- Allow your tot to sit on a small therapy ball at a child sized table.

### Muscle Tools

- Prior to eating, play push/pull games, such as pushing a weighted grocery cart.
- Place a heavy beanbag on your tot's lap to help him relax while eating.
- Use weighted utensils to increase sensory awareness of the hands.
- Offering a plate with a lip guard may help to decrease spills.
- Placing a plate on a nonskid place mat, or even a wet wash cloth, will help to hold it still, allowing your tot to have control of his eating utensils.
- Have your tot carry new foods to the table.
- Provide meals using a tot sized table and chair with arms. If your tot has *over-responsivity* or a *postural disorder*, he may find adult sized tables and chairs intimidating.

### Touch Tools

- Start with large amounts of food textures that your tot with *over-responsivity* or *dyspraxia* tolerates (e.g. smooth, crunchy, or mushy), and gradually add small, barely noticeable amounts of non-preferred textures to the preferred ones (e.g. smashed graham to pudding, or sprinkles to yogurt).
- Change food textures by freezing, shredding, mashing, etc.
- Your tot may tolerate foods without 'lumps' or with meltable 'bumps' (e.g. graham crackers).
- Sneak fruits or vegetables into muffin mixes, pancake batter, hamburgers, etc.
- Encourage your tot to help mix cookie dough or other foods with his hands.
- Allow your tot to use his fingers or utensils to self-feed without worrying about the mess.
- Paint with pudding or yogurt, encouraging your tot to use his finger or a pretzel.
- Gradually vary food temperatures if your tot has a strong preference for only one (e.g. cold or hot).
- Offer assorted dips for finger foods.
- If your tot does not like to touch food, offer a breadstick or pretzel for a dip stick.
- Find other times to play with food outside of mealtimes (e.g. pudding or gelatin) at a different spot than your tot usually eats.

### Ear Tools

- Together, read fun storybooks about eating new foods, or design your own.
- Consider eating in a quiet place rather than a noisy one.
- During meals play slow music for your tot with *over-responsivity* or fast music for your tot with *under-responsivity*.