



Working with Sensory Sensitivity at Home

The suggestions in this handout are for children that have difficulty managing sensory input from the environment. This is often a contributory factor to a child's reluctance to eat certain foods. Please read the handout on understanding sensory sensitivity before looking at this handout.

There are two main aspects to working with sensory sensitivity at home:

Adapting the sensory environment

One is to organise your family life so that your child can cope with their sensory environment. This means looking at what sensory things distress your child and thinking of how you can minimise this distress. For example, some children cannot cope with excessive noise so you may need to make sure there is a quiet space for them to retreat to if others need to listen to music or carry out a noisy task such as hoovering. Earphones can help a child to cut out noise.

Other children may have difficulty with strong smells, and you may need to keep them away from the kitchen when you are cooking. Others need to eat their food away from the family meal if they are sensitive to the sounds, smells and look of other people eating foods.

Widening a child's sensory acceptance

This is about trying to move a child on so that they can cope with more sensory experiences. This is called de-sensitisation and



you can read more about this in the handout on understanding sensory sensitivity. This can be very specific, where you work on a particular sense (e.g. touch) with a particular aim (e.g. for a child to allow foods to the side of the mouth}. This kind of work is usually done with the support of a professional who decides what area to work on and helps to break down the process into small steps.

For parents at home without access to this guidance, I would suggest that you do more general de-sensitisation where you involve the child in activities that expose them to stimulation that is slightly challenging and new. Children with feeding difficulties are often sensitive to how food looks, tastes, feels and smells and you can work on the underlying senses of vision, touch, taste and smell in a general way. These activities may not always have an immediate impact on the child's eating and acceptance of food, but they are likely to produce benefits of a general kind and prepare the child for the time when they are ready to move onto new foods.

Does and Don'ts

You may have heard the expression 'do no harm' that is a fundamental principle of medical practice. It applies to any intervention, really – and with feeding difficulties it is possible to do harm. For example, we talk about how hiding a disliked food in a liked food can actually lead to the loss of the liked food. So, these are things to think of when you try any activities.

Remember that causing anxiety and distress will only set things back. However, you are trying to challenge the child a little and we



all know that new challenges can cause anxiety. So, how do you balance challenge and anxiety? The key things are that the child has trust in you and can control activities. The child is able to tell you when they have had enough, and you will stop at their request. At the same time, you have to be very alert to the child's signals and know when to pull back from something that is causing too much discomfort or anxiety. Most parents are able to do this if they trust their own instincts.

These activities should not be part of mealtimes and the focus is not on getting the child to eat anything. The activities are designed to be interactive and fun so that the child is not concentrating on the new sensations in a conscious way. You start a play session with something easy and build up to something more challenging. Always try to end up with a feeling of success.

Things to try at home

You will have to choose and adapt these activities according to your child's age, interests and development. These activities are particularly focussed on touch but also include smell and vision. They are not about getting a child to eat food! You can adapt how you carry out the activities so they suit the age and development of your child. Don't forget the handwashing protocol for COVID19!



Find some objects with different textures and a drawstring bag. You can talk about the objects and handle them before putting them in the bag. Then take it in turns to pull out objects. Remember that hard, smooth objects will be easier than squishy, uneven or bristly objects. If your child is very sensitive, you can start by getting the objects out yourself and seeing if the child will touch any of them.

You can vary the activity by hiding the objects around the room



Arts and craft activities are a way of developing touch experiences: finger painting, sticking things on with glue, making collages. You can also use sand, starting with dry sand and moving towards wet if the child can cope. With dry sand you can do things like sieve it or fill different containers, pretend it is dinner for teddies etc.



Explore the consistencies of different substances (e.g. dry pasta, smarties, cornflour and water, jelly) by feeling them with your hands or pouring them out of containers. Remember that anything that sticks to your hands is harder to tolerate than something that is dry. Some things may be more difficult because they have a smell.



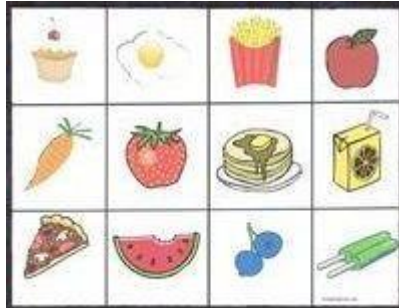
Gardening is another activity involving lots of touch. You can do this inside if you don't have a garden. You can get your child to fill a pot with dry soil and plant seeds. They can help you water plants or help harvest crops. They can put bird seed into a bird feeder.



The kitchen is another place with the potential for sensory experiences. Children can help to make pastry or bread, decorate cakes or put out biscuits on a plate. Remember, this is not to do with eating food. If a child chooses to taste something, that is a bonus. It is not the point of what you are trying to do.



Working with pictures



You can work with food items in pictures, developing card games like Pairs or Odd one out, or sorting out sets of similar foods. Or hide cards around the room. These games enable the child to become more comfortable with the look of different foods. They also help with the ability to form categories, such as biscuits, fruits, vegetables, puddings. You can cut out pictures from magazines or old cookery books or recipe cards.

With young children, use simple language to describe the pictures, words like red, round, long, juicy, sweet, yummy, hot, cold. With older children you can use more complex language. You can talk about whether you think you would like a food in your mouth. For example, you could say, 'I might not like that because I think it would feel slimy' or 'I like an apple to be crisp and juicy'. You are trying to give the child the ability to express what they like or don't like about foods.

Above all, have fun!

Birmingham Food Refusal Services

