



Advice for infants and children with delayed weaning and oral aversion

This leaflet aims to give more information, advice and strategies for parents or carers with infants / children who are taking longer to move from milk to solids (delayed weaning) or children who have difficulties with eating solid foods.

The following are commonly found in children with feeding difficulties:

- Gagging or retching on foods
- Food refusal / anxiety or fear of trying new foods
- Sensory processing difficulties – e.g. being over or under sensitive to the texture, temperature and smell of foods, which can make eating unpleasant for some children
- Physical reason, e.g. history of reflux and vomiting

It is important to first check whether there is an underlying reason for your child not being able to wean properly or accept solid foods.

- Are they well?
- Are they teething?
- Do they have underlying reflux which is not currently being treated?
- Do they have tongue tie?
- Do they have any allergies?
- Are they constipated?
- Are they ready to wean?

Tips for encouraging your infant/child to explore new foods and to develop positive experiences

- **Routine** around milk. If your child drinks a lot of milk, they may be too full to want to eat. Aim to leave at least 1–2 hours before a meal or snack after drinking milk. If your child is drinking more than 600mls of milk each day, consider reducing the volume / frequency of their milk feeds to promote appetite for food
- **Environment** - create a calm environment without background noise and distractions
- **Model** eating by sitting down with your child and eating with them. They will learn by copying you, so this is very important. Some children may need a distraction to help reduce anxiety around eating. Discover what your child responds best to
- Try to **reduce your anxiety** around meal/snack times. It can be worrying if your child won't eat but the majority of children continue to grow and gain weight despite limited diets. Children can be very sensitive to your feelings, and this could have a negative impact on them eating
- **Repeated exposure** – children need repeated exposure to new foods before they are comfortable eating them. If they don't accept a food to start with, keep offering it to them on 2–3 occasions per week. Try offering the same food prepared in different ways, e.g. banana chopped, mashed, dried, frozen or baked

- **Consistency** –this is important to help reduce anxiety around eating because your child will learn what is expected, e.g. sitting down at the table for 20 minutes to eat and then the food is cleared away
- **Describe** the food and talk about how it smells, feels, looks, and where it comes from
- Use **mirrors** so children can see themselves eating
- Involve children in **cooking and food preparation** – they can help to pour out ingredients or mix with a wooden spoon
- Mesh or silicone feeders, when used under supervision, are a good way for your child to experience the taste of a food, without having to swallow it. This can help build confidence to swallow the food in the future

Messy play

What is it?

Messy play is a great way for your child to explore new foods through stimulating their senses of TOUCH, SMELL, SIGHT and TASTE. This repeated exposure will help to increase their confidence in trying new foods.

Dry foods are usually tolerated before wet foods, especially in children with sensory processing difficulties. They can then make small, gradual steps to exploring wetter textures as they become more comfortable and confident.

Before you start:

- Supervise your child at all times during food play, particularly if you are using hard foods
- If your child has any food allergies, do not use these foods during food play
- It is best to set up food play outside of mealtimes and away from your main eating area - an outside space, the bath or some floor space work well
- Keep sessions short to begin with (15–20 minutes) - the focus of these sessions is children having fun with food without pressure to eat. Try to involve your child in messy food play at least three times per week
- It WILL get MESSY! Put down plastic sheets, old bed sheets or tablecloths to prepare. You will also get messy! Do not clean during messy play
- It is important for you to model the activity first as this will help your child feel more comfortable
- This is not about them eating the food but playing with the food. If they do happen to lick their fingers with food on, then that is a bonus!

Moving from dry to wet textures

Dry foods: cereals/dry pasta/oats/dried beans (doesn't change shape – dry / course)

Dry fine: couscous, dry lentils, sugar, flour

Wet / firm: slight residue left on surfaces but stable shape, e.g. dough / chopped banana / grapes / cheese cubes

Wet / tacky: cooked pasta / cooked rice

Wet semi-solid: jelly / mousse / custard

Wet liquid: chocolate sauce

Wet mix: baked beans / spaghetti hoops / cereal with milk

Activities

Dry textures

1. **Crushing** dried biscuits, corn flakes, crisps, shredded wheat with hands
2. **Touching** dry foods poured into a tray, e.g. pasta, rice, noodles, lentils, flour (when moving to wetter textures these are good foods to use, as some could be cooked)
3. **Cutting** toast/bread/pancakes into different shapes
4. **Making** bracelets/necklaces out of dry pasta shapes
5. **Imaginative play** use dolls/teddies to 'walk' or 'dive' into food

Wet textures

1. **Mixing** cake batter, pizza or chapatti dough
2. **Moulding and squeezing** yogurt, cooked rice, soft fruits/well-cooked or mashed vegetables, lumpy mash, spaghetti (with hands or feet)
3. **Scooping** mousse or jelly out of a bowl
4. **Sprinkle** hundreds and thousands into custard, yogurt, dhal, other sauces
5. **Setting** things in jelly to find, e.g. chocolate buttons
6. **Pour** soup or runny custard from one cup or bowl to another
7. **Painting** using sauces/chocolate spread

Temperature

1. **Touching** and playing with ice cream, frozen yogurt, cold jelly
2. **Squashing** cooked macaroni, warm rice, porridge, mashed potato

N.B. Children under 18 months: ensure they are able to sit independently but they do not have to remain sitting throughout messy play.

If your child is not able to sit independently ensure they are placed in supportive seating with a feeding tray.

Introducing new foods

- This should be done in a 'none pressured environment' and therefore it is usually better to introduce new foods away from mealtimes
- If possible, agree on when to try a new food in the upcoming week, including times and what foods. Tasting times should last around 10 minutes or less
- Make the process of trying a new food the same each time, to help children build confidence to try a new food and so that they know what to expect
- Try to make tasting times fun, e.g. getting them to dress up in a lab coat or having score cards available to rate the food. Use plates or cutlery with their favourite characters on
- Introduce new foods in a gradual way and choose foods which are similar in taste, texture or appearance to foods already accepted. This is called **food chaining**, e.g. if they will only eat thin cut white bread from a large loaf, try offering the following foods:

Small loaf of same bread → same brand but thickly sliced → unsliced bread → 50/50 white and wholemeal bread → pitta bread → pizza bases

Step-wise introduction of new foods

It can be helpful to break down introducing new foods into steps as shown below:

Step 1: TALK about the food. Look at the food together and discuss where the food comes from, how it is made. Talk about why the food is good for you.

Step 2: EXPLORE

- You can use a 'learning plate' if foods are tried outside of mealtimes
- Make trying a new food fun - make shapes with food
- If your child does not like foods touching use a plate with dividers

Step 3: TOUCH

- Describe sensory properties, e.g. colour, texture, taste
- Avoid saying words such as 'good' or 'yummy'
- Embrace mess / play games with food

Step 4: SMELL

- Describe what the new food may smell like

Step 5: LICK / BITE

- Encourage your child to make shapes in the food with their teeth

Step 6: CHEW / SWALLOW

- Reassure your child they can chew a food and spit it out if disliked
- Give lots of praise for trying a new food
- If they don't like the food, still give praise for trying and discuss trying it again. It may take 10 attempts or more to accept a new food

Accessibility

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