Getting Messy With Food

Some sensory activity ideas to encourage children to try new foods.
Why might a child be finding it difficult to eat a range of foods?

Fussy eating is part of normal development but most children will get past this stage. There are some children, however, for which this remains a problem. The two most common reasons for this are sensory hypersensitivity and/or rigid behaviour patterns.

Many children can survive on a very restricted diet but this can be socially isolating for the child and family.

Sensory

Eating is an intense sensory experience. Our mouth and hands are particularly sensitive and have a greater number of sensory receptors. If a child’s sensory system is hypersensitive this can lead to aversion to certain textures, tastes and smells.

The following ideas work on the sensory systems that are involved in order to make it easier for children to accept new foods.

Grading

It is important to carefully monitor a child’s reactions and do not force a child to do an activity that they are not comfortable with. Grading activities should go at the child’s pace. It is best to keep the activity that you are doing similar and only change one thing at a time.

It is important to remember that progress is likely to be slow and children will progress at different rates. Activities should be carried out in short spells frequently. Activities should be done outwith snack or mealtimes so that there is no added pressure to eat. A child is more likely to try new food if they have the option of not swallowing it.

Remember that a child may also have a physical reason why eating is difficult. If you think this is the case then it is important to seek advice from a speech and language therapist.
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<th>Activities to use during a Messy Play session with your child</th>
<th>Reason</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Song e.g. head, shoulders, knees or toes or Simon Says</td>
<td>Activity to raise awareness of body parts related to touching and eating. If child unable to point to body parts adult can facilitate.</td>
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<td>2. Feely Bag</td>
<td>To encourage exploration of a variety of textures. Talk about the objects that come out of the bag e.g. it’s soft, it smells of.</td>
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<td>3. Messy Play activity</td>
<td>This activity will help to desensitise children to new foods in a fun way. This includes visual, smell, noise, touch. It is best to use favourite toys along with the new food e.g. driving car through jelly.</td>
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<td>4. Bubbles or other blowing activity e.g. whistles</td>
<td>Calming activity to refocus on group</td>
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<td>5. Graded food activity</td>
<td>Activity using visual prompts to work through stages of touch it, smell it, kiss it, lick it, bite it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fun activity</td>
<td>Try to finish on a fun activity that you know your child enjoys</td>
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1. **Song ideas – songs should focus on hands and mouth**

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 Once I caught a fish alive
Tommy thumb
Head, shoulders knees and Toes
If you are happy and you know it
Wind the bobbin up
Open shut them

2. **Feely Bag Ideas**

- Balls e.g. furry, spiky, noisy,
- Plastic animals/cars
- Soft materials e.g. pom poms, pieces of ribbon/materials, cotton wool balls
- Scented toys e.g. scented pens, spray materials to give them a smell
- Plastic food
- Food in packets e.g. packets of crisps, packets of sweets, jelly
- Dry food e.g. biscuit, pasta, rice cakes,
- Other non messy foods e.g. carrots, satsumas, tomatoes
**Other ideas to think about:**

It may be too threatening for some children to put their hands into a bag so the adult may have to take the object out for them or it may be that the object is half out of the bag.

Pass the object between one another and talk about how it feels.

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**3. Messy Play activity Ideas**

As with all the activities in the session these ideas should be graded. To do this you need to know what the child is currently comfortable doing. It is fine to keep the activity the same and make the foodstuff more challenging.

Dry foods are less challenging than wet. Mixed wet and dry textures are even more challenging.

Safety note – just be mindful of what you are using as some children may put things in their mouth.
Dry food examples

- **Cereals** – pouring, crushing, threading cheerios, finding objects within bowls of cereal. Sorting cereals into different bowls

- **Pasta** – threading penne pasta, snapping spaghetti, blowing through pasta tubes, finding objects within bowl of pasta, load into toy truck/trains, drive car through piles of pasta

- **Rice/lentils** – pour into different containers, finds objects in them e.g. ball for the ball run, cars, draw in them on a tray, make musical instruments, load into trucks, feed the animals, drive cars through

- **Biscuits/breadsticks/crackers/crisps** – breaking, snapping, crushing with cars/animals, smelling.


Wet food examples

- **Cooked Pasta** - use similar activities to those used with the dry pasta.

- **Cooked vegetables** – again use similar activities to those for the dry veg. Once cooked you can encourage the children to cut up, squash with toys/hands.

- **Jelly** – hide objects in the jelly to find e.g. cars, small animals, parts of a game. Drive cars through, squash with toys/hands.

- **Chocolate Spread** – finger paint, draw in it on a tray, drive cars through, cover things with it

- **Custard** – activities as above
**Mixed textures**

Use activities that encourage the child to mix the textures themselves. These may include making a farm scene where they stick broccoli in choc spread to make trees, have fun mixing up jelly and pasta to make food for the cows. Mix stuff in trucks.

Glue pasta/ cereals to paper and use wet foodstuffs as finger paint.

Provide a range of different foodstuffs for them to be messy with – there are no limits!! Remember it does not have to be food stuffs that would normally go together, spaghetti can go with custard and cereal with tomato sauce!

**NB:**

*If a child has a very restricted diet, do not use foods that they do eat as part of the activities as this may put them off eating them.*

**4. Blowing Activities**

- Blowing bubbles
- Blowing whistles, party tooters, musical instruments
- Using a straw to blow cotton wool balls across table
- Blowing through a straw into juice to create bubbles
Graded food activity

Touch it, smell it, Kiss it, lick it, Bite it, Chew it

This is a structured, multisensory approach to children accepting new food textures. Use small pea sized amount of food for these steps as a whole portion is often too daunting a task.

**Touch it** – A child needs to know that a food is safe to touch before they will attempt to put it near their mouth. This step may be scraping the food off a plate or putting it in the bin.

**Smell it** – A child needs to know and tolerate the smell of a food before putting it near their mouth.

**Kiss it** – This step enable the child to quickly interact with the foodstuff with their mouth.

**Lick it** – This is introducing taste in a non-threatening way

**Bite it** – A more intense taste experience but without the pressure of eating it. At this stage the child is able to spit it out if necessary.

**Chew it** – Involves desensitising the whole mouth to the taste and texture of the food. The hope at this stage is child will swallow the food but they may still need to spit it out.