

'Tasting Time' Guidance for parents and teachers.

When children have experienced symptoms like vomiting, reflux, abdominal pain or discomfort, constipation or diarrhoea in early childhood, they are often very wary of putting things in their mouth, or of chewing and swallowing. Some children feel safer with some textures (e.g. purees), but will refuse others (e.g. lumpy foods or hard foods).

Such children may need to be helped to gain confidence with eating. Some also need to acquire the skills needed to eat age appropriate foods as they may never have done this. When babies are weaned, they develop oral motor skills to enable them to move food around their mouth, and to chew and swallow. Coughing and spluttering is a normal part of the weaning process, however, in children with feeding problems who have never eaten normally, such incidents can be scary.

Helping children gain confidence usually means putting them in control of eating and going at their pace – even though this can seem frustratingly slow. If children are pushed too quickly, before they feel safe, there is a risk of perpetuating the cycle of negative associations with food, and ultimately this will hold them back.

Be patient, as children will make progress at different rates. This tends to be related to their character traits and to what else is going on for them.

A naturally anxious or cautious child will take a little longer than a child who is more naturally inquisitive and likes exploring. A child experiencing stress for whatever reason (e.g. starting nursery, moving house, birth of a sibling, etc) may be less likely to take steps forward at that time.

There are a number of key principles that everyone who cares for a child with a feeding problem is aware of – this includes parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, child-minders, nursery and school staff or any other carers:

- Encourage and allow a child to self-feed. This puts the child in control, and when they feel in control they will be more likely to try new things.
- Be consistent. All adults need to be adopting the same approach. If even one adult tries to do it “their way”, the feeding situation can be experienced as unpredictable, and there is a risk of setting things back.
- Don't take away foods or drinks that the child feels safe with or derives comfort from. The best thing is to gently encourage the addition of new things while allowing the child to continue with safe foods. If bottles, safe foods, etc are suddenly taken away,

many children will simply not eat or drink and will lose weight and become unwell. Remember that in many children with feeding problems the problem is not that they are not hungry.

Tasting Time Principles:

- Tasting time can be one useful approach to help build a child's confidence with foods, new textures, tastes or smells. Try to make 'tasting time' enjoyable and non-threatening. Encourage the child to look at, smell and touch food, but don't insist they try it yet. Helping them feel relaxed and comfortable in the presence of food is very important. Once they are, they will be more likely to lick, bite, chew or swallow new foods.
- Tasting time should **not** happen at meal times; mealtimes may be associated with stress, frustration or worry for children and families struggling with feeding problems. It is often helpful for nursery or school staff to introduce it at a set time in the child's day, so that it becomes part of a routine.
- Tasting time should **only** last for 10- 15 minutes and should be as much fun as possible. Remember this is not just about the child's confidence but also about your level of enjoyment and stress. The more fun you have and the less stressed you are, the more enjoyable the child will find the experience. This will help the child break the negative cycle of associating food with negative feelings and emotions.
- Tasting time is **never** about failing to achieve. A small reward, such as a sticker, should be given for the smallest achievement. In this case 'licking' might be a huge achievement and should be praised and instantly rewarded - not later on! The child might not get to 'swallowing' for some time. You might need to adjust your expectations about the pace of change, deal with any frustration you experience, and work at not putting your expectations onto the child.
- Plan your tasting time sessions. If you are doing this at home, 2 or 3 sessions per week may be enough at a time that fits with family life. Choose a time when you know your child is in a good mood. Remember you know your child best there is no point in trying something if they are not going to have the best chance to succeed.
- Factor into your planning what new food you will try. You might not want to start with something you know your child would not touch. You do not need to break the bank, use foods that the rest of the family have usually.

These are just some of the strategies families we have worked with have found helpful. Remember all children are different and that consistency in approach is one of the most important things for all those involved in the care of any one child.

**The Feeding Disorders Team
Great Ormond Street Hospital**