

BEST Strategies for Adding New Foods into Your Child's Diet

Did you know that between 70 to 90 percent of children on the autism spectrum struggle with eating? (Cermak et al, 2010). Eating a very narrow diet with very specific foods (also referred to as extreme picky eating) is a main worry for parents and caregivers because it can affect a child's development and, it causes family conflict and stress. Mealtimes can easily become the most challenging times in a family's day so please know that you are not alone.

To help parents remember proven strategies that help incorporate new foods into a child's diet without the often tried but ineffective tactics of coercing or persuading, I encourage them to think of my BEST (Body, Emotional, Sensory and Thinking) framework instead. I would like to share one actionable strategy for each section of the framework that, in my experience, prove to be most successful in adding new foods into a child's diet.

Prior to trying any of these strategies, remember to enlist the help of your pediatrician if your child has been diagnosed with a medical condition or if you are worried about your child's ability to eat solid food safely or if you have any other concerns about your child's feeding skills

Body Strategy: Help your child manage anxiety by engaging in relaxing activities before meals

Anxiety shuts down hunger in a powerful way by putting the child in a biological state of 'fight or flight' which leads to a racing heart and tight stomach and means that they will not be comfortable enough during mealtimes to be able to try new foods. To support your child in trying new foods, spend a few minutes helping them relax their bodies before mealtimes. One way to do this is to practice deep breathing together. This may mean slowly and deeply inhaling for a count of four, then slowly and fully exhaling for a count of seven or eight. You can also blow pinwheels, bubbles or even a wind instrument such as a recorder or harmonica. Or you might use those five minutes engaging your child in a calming deep pressure activity such as a pushing hands against the wall (have your child lean in with his or her full weight) completing a fun 'tug of war' with a towel or having your child push the palms of his or her hands against yours for a few seconds.



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Emotional Strategy: Model good eating behaviours because your child is watching and learning from you!

While it is very challenging to remain calm when the food that you've lovingly prepared is met with refusal, crying or a meltdown, it is important to try and portray a calm demeanour (even when you feel everything BUT calm in the inside!). Let go of what you can and try to ENJOY sitting with your child preferably across each other at a table. Even if your child does not eat at first, a positive, light atmosphere will make it far more likely that they will eat in the near future! Also, make sure that you eat with your child because they need to see a parent or a trusted caregiver eating the new food for them to be more likely to begin to take the steps needed towards placing the new food in their mouth and taking a bite.



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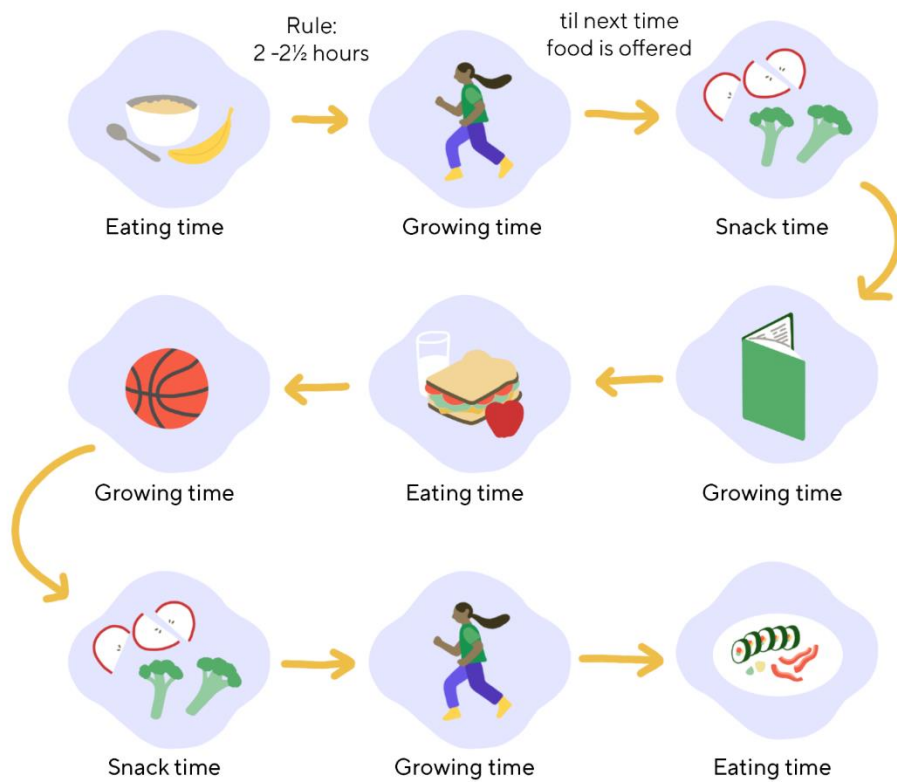
Sensory Strategy: Continue to expose your child to different foods and encourage them to explore, play and get messy with food because children learn through play, and this includes playing with food!

Encourage your child to interact with food through all of their senses. Talk about the look and feel of foods. Ask questions like: What is the texture like? What does it taste like? What does it smell like? What does it look like? If your child is non-speaking, you can answer these questions yourself and continue to narrate the experience. Think of it as “food school,” and reserve some time each week to engage in food learning through play. Your child may or may not eat the foods he or she is exploring. The idea is to build a foundation that leads to a greater comfort with foods.



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Thinking Strategy: Work towards having set times for meals and snacks. This is probably the most challenging strategy to implement but the one that proves most successful time and time again. Space meals and snacks every 2 to 3 hours. Try to eliminate snacking and drinking – including milk and juice – in between. The idea is to help your child become more aware of their internal hunger signals because these signals are powerful motivators to eat. Also, this strategy helps your child’s body begin to expect food and accept food at designated times.



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