



# *Survival of the Tastiest*

## Helping Young Children with ASD Who Have Eating Issues

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## Introduction: Survival of the Tastiest



- Many parents of children with ASD tell me that when their children were younger, they ate a broad range of baby and toddler foods.
- But as they got older, they become more and more picky (aka, "Extreme Food Selectivity"\*)
- They started eliminating vegetables because they were not as tasty as other foods, then cereals that were not sweet, etc.
- Then they tasted sugary, salty, and fattier foods so they narrowed their diets even more.
- Until they were eating chips, fries, nuggets, and pizza. The tastiest foods our culture has to offer.

\*Fifty to 90% percent of children with autism have some level of food selectivity! (Ledford & Gast, 2006).

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It's Darwinian Only the tastiest survives!

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**Do you know what Martian children  
with autism eat?**

**Martian food!**



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## Overview Why do children with ASD have eating issues?

- Medical considerations
- Family and Parenting: PEP on the POP
- Sensory Causes of Poor Eating
- Developmental and Behavioral Considerations
- Practical Tips for Helping the Picky Eater

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ASD &amp; Eating

## Medical/Physical considerations



- True medical/physical causes of eating issues in children with ASD are uncommon but potentially serious. . .
- Main symptoms: pain and weight loss, maybe consistent/chronic choking, vomiting, and/or coughing after meals with or without cyanosis (turning blue)
- The most common physical causes:
  - Constipation and/or soiling
  - Dental problems
  - Occult and chronic Otitis Media (ear infections)
  - GERD: Gastroesophageal Reflux Disorder
    - Hx of burping, excessive swallowing, acute episodes of pain, food avoidance
    - Treatment: A trial of antacids—Tums, Zantac
  - Gastritis, esophagitis

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## Medical considerations: Allergies and Pica



- Food allergies or intolerance (gassiness, cramping, diarrhea, rashes)
  - Less common than parents think.
  - Food elimination and re-introduction is the best way, not blood tests.
  - Common culprits:
    - Milk, peanuts, eggs
    - Then corn, soy, and wheat
  - Research does not support the value of GF/CF diets,
    - Further narrows diets unnecessarily but. . .
    - Can change the tastiest foods since most have gluten and/or casein!
  - Go to a *real* pediatric allergist
- Pica—eating non-food items (dirt, lint, etc)
  - Check for iron, lead
  - May be due to lack of ability to discriminate food from non-food

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## Uncommon Medical Conditions



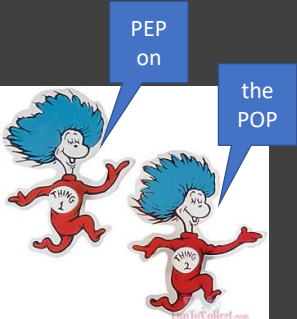
- Extreme prematurity
  - Feeding tubes and long periods of non-nutritive sucking
- Inflammatory bowel disease
  - Ulcerative colitis
  - Crohn's
- Persistent Vomiting
  - Rumination—throwing up and swallowing down
  - Cyclic vomiting
  - Obstruction (Very serious!)
- Tracheo-esophageal fistula (coughing, weight loss)
- Hirschsprung's—inherited intestinal bowel denervation of the colon
  - Usually presents as severe constipation early in life
- Achalasia—trouble swallowing due to narrowing of the esophagus

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## For all suspected medical conditions refer to the child's physician!

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Family and Parenting: PEP  
on the POP

- The most common cause of 'picky eating' is. . . .
- **Poor Eating Practices** on the **Part of Parents** (aka: PEP on the POP)
- The most famous American Dietician—Ellyn Satter—says:

*"It's the **parents' job** to put good food on the table.*

It's the **child's job** to eat."



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# Make Family Meal Time Fun



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## PEP on the POP: Poor Mealtime Practices



- Pressuring and conflict
- Parents use media to distract their child while feeding them. Without the media, they won't eat
- Parents *feed their child* beyond the age necessary
  - Common in certain cultures
- Chasing the child around the house with food
- Too much milk or milk substitutes (e.g. Pediasure)
- Making multiple meals

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## Daily Diet Summary



- I always obtain a daily diet summary:
  - Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks
  - Often the diet is not as bad as parents think (Pizza, nuggets, fries, bacon (an ASD favorite!), yogurt, chips, cookies is a pretty good diet in terms of basic nutrition)
  - When we get down to less than 5-7 foods I get worried
- I ask about conflict between parents (and grandparents) around meals
- I ask about types of food: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, crunchy, soft
- Still on the bottle? (Signs of 'permissiveness')
- Can they use utensils?
- More often than not what is driving the picky eating is 'fear' and 'guilt' . . .

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## Fears leading to PEP on the POP



- My child will starve.
  - False.
  - I can count on one hand the children who lost weight from non-medical reasons. Usually these are older children who have had years of eating issues.
- He'll go hungry!
  - True and then he'll eat if you put good tasting and high quality food on his plate.
- I'll feel bad if he goes hungry.
  - True we all do. The question is: do you want your child to eat a broader array of healthy foods?

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## PEP on the POP: Parent Psychology



### Beware the 'message of incompetence'.

“You poor child with ASD, you can’t handle a little hunger.”

### Beware of guilt

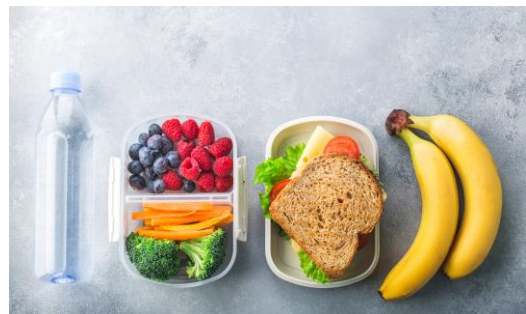
“I’m a bad parent if my child doesn’t eat.”

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## A Good Diet is Better Than a Bad Diet



- Fresh
- Local
- Whole (looks like food—not Fish Crackers)
- Not processed
- Not white (sugar, flour, salt)
- Organic



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Remember  
what Ellyn Satter says:

"It's the parent's job  
to put good food  
on the table."

"It's the child's job  
to eat."

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Sensory  
causes of poor  
eating

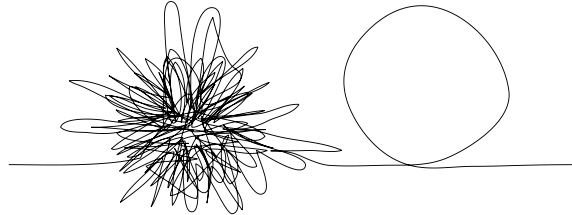
- Overstimulating/Chaotic Environment
- Tastes, textures, temperature, & touch
- OCD

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## Overstimulating/Chaotic Environment



- Trouble with transitions
- Noisy chaotic dinner time
- No routines
  - Dinner at various times or no real dinner 'time'
- Disruptive siblings
- TV/Media on



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## Taste, Textures, Temperature, & Touch



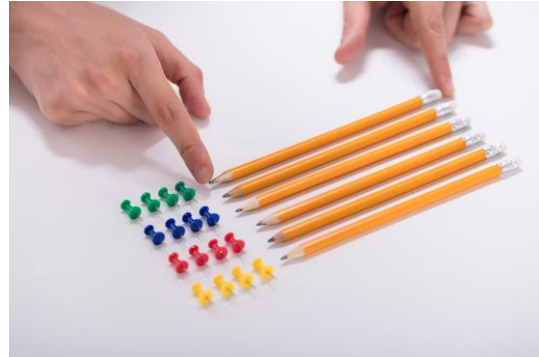
- Taste: Salty, sweet, sour, bitter, peppery, hot
- Smell: Bland vs strong
- Temperature: Hot, cold, warm
- Look: color, size, consistency, uniformity
- Amount: Don't overwhelm with too much on the plate
- Touch: Hard, gooey, soft, yucky
- Texture: Crunchy, smooth
- Sound: Loud, noisy, chaotic environments may hinder eating

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# OCD



- Stubborn & wrong
- Perfectionistic, rigid, & particular
- True OCD
- Start with very small changes
- Use the “Tussle” technique
- See ‘desensitization’ protocol below (10 tips)



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ASD & Eating

## Behavioral & Developmental Considerations



Eating is largely a conditioned behavior and becomes developmental as the child ages



Lack of appetite is normal



Trouble sitting



Problems with transitions



Oppositionality, defiance



Neophobia—Fear of anything new (anxiety)

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## ASD & Eating: Developmental Considerations



- Prevention: Since eating is a very conditioned behavioral activity, developmental considerations are not as important in the beginning
  - Children will eat what they are used to and what they are exposed to
    - Indian children eat Indian food—Pakora, papadam, raita, Chana masala
- As children age, they eat less. Parent should not fret. Growth curves flatten out and it is quite normal for appetite to diminish.
  - Leave their plate and let them come back to it later
- Developmentally, young children don't sit for long periods of time.

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## “He/She won't sit at the dinner table.”



- Expand expected sit time *g-r-a-d-u-a-l-l-y* so success is built up slowly.
- Physical activity before they are asked to sit at a table might help.
- Set a timer to show more concretely that sitting is expected at mealtime, at least for a few minutes until the timer rings.
- Some children can sit and eat but can't wait for others
  - Special waiting toys or activities are okay (esp. at restaurants).
    - Something to read or a pocket-sized game or fidget to focus on

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# ASD & Eating: Developmental Considerations

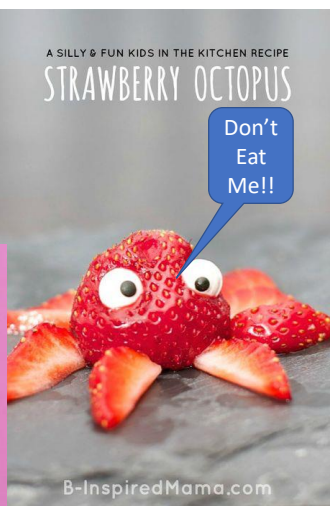


- Transitions to the dinner table can be difficult.
  - Reference: 'Dr. Rick's 20 Transition Tricks'
- As functional development increases, oppositionality and neophobia (few of the new) are normal.
  - They have real preferences.
  - But don't concede food territory easily.
  - Explain why eating good food is important
  - Keep putting good food on the plate.
  - Use oppositionality: "Don't you eat my (strawberry) nose!"
- Give some control and choices but don't fight over food.
- Make eating fun by being creative.



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## Fun Food Ideas



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## 10 Practical Tips for Helping the Picky Eater



1. Parents job to put good food on the table and the child's job to eat
  - Keep the plate out and let them come back when they are hungry or . .
  - If the child won't eat the good food, offer them 1 (just one boring) alternate good food option like PB&J (i.e. Don't cook multiple meals)
2. Prevention: 'Survival of the Tastiest'.
  - Don't narrow food choices easily!
  - But do give children several choices so they can feel in control of their meals
3. PEP on the POP
  - If parents are fighting or anxious about eating, they are doing something wrong
  - Watch out for FEAR and GUILT. Help parents have faith in their children's hunger
  - Behind every mother is a mother

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## 10 Practical Tips for Helping the Picky Eater



4. If children have narrowed their diets, try: *Backward Chaining*:
  - Reintroduce food they ate before
  - 'Keep the World the Same': Keep all new foods 'similar but different' to old foods (crackers that are similar, etc.)
  - Match foods by familiar color, texture & smell
  - Mix the new food with a familiar and preferred food (but watch out if the child finds out you were 'tricking' them.)
5. Make dinner time a fun family time
  - If parents are fighting or anxious about eating, they are doing something wrong.
  - Visually: Use fun finger foods to entice children to eat veggies

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## 10 Practical Tips for Helping the Picky Eater



### 6. Set up the sensory environment for success

- Visually: Use fun finger foods to entice children to eat veggies
- Desensitize (gradual and repeated daily exposures—it can take many exposures)



- Simply *look* at the new food together
- *Smell* it
- *Touch* it / play with it (allowed!)
- *Lick* it once
- Then *tasting, just a bite*
- *Consider a separate plate*
- Small amounts are best



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## 10 Practical Tips for Helping the Picky Eater



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## 10 Practical Tips for Helping the Picky Eater



7. Talk to your child (if developmentally appropriate) about good food
  - Use a **social story** (Carol Gray)
  - **Use a fable** describing a favorite character like Barney or Spiderman eating this particular food
  - Use **modeling** (“Hey Mikey, he likes it!”)
  - Take a **video** of daddy, mommy, or sibling eating and enjoying it
8. Use a 5 Star reward system for tasting new foods
  - Just a tongue tip taste gets a star
  - 5 stars gets a prize
9. Use the food the child wants as a reward for trying something new
  - If you try this, then you can have that (if/then)
  - And you will make mommy so happy (NO! The child should not eat to make your happy—this was a trick tip!)

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## 10. Success!!



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## References & Resources



- Ellyn Satter, *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*
- Ledford, J.R. & Gast, D.L. (2006). Feeding problems in children with autism spectrum disorders: A review. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 21, 153-166.
- Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
  - <https://www.autismspeaks.org/expert-opinion/encouraging-picky-eaters-autism-try-new-foods>
- Autism Speaks
  - <https://www.merakilane.com/autism-eating-8-tips-help-picky-eater-autism>
- Indiana Resource Center for Autism
  - <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/articles/mealtime-and-children-on-the-autism-spectrum-beyond-picky-fussy-and-fads>

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## Thank you!



*This webinar will be posted to our website!*

- Next webinar:
  - May 27
- Advanced Conference and Reunion Retreat
  - April 16 & 17 | Columbus, Ohio
- Upcoming workshops
  - February 28-29 | Dallas, Texas
  - March 26-27 | British Columbia, Canada
  - April 24 -25 | Williamsburg, Virginia

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