



# Fussy eaters & mealtime difficulties

*by Denise Stapleton APD & Gillian Griffiths OT*

Eating can seem like a simple behaviour, but did you know that one in two infants and toddlers are reported by their caregivers to have feeding problems? Fussy or picky eating usually passes as children get older, however, mealtimes for some are fraught with ongoing grimacing and gagging. Children and caregivers can feel distressed, anxious, worried, frustrated and angry when mealtimes are difficult.

## **What causes mealtime difficulties?**

There is a long list of things that can trigger problems with eating, drinking and mealtimes. If a child experiences a premature or complicated birth, has early hospitalisation, has medical or developmental conditions, pain, trauma, excessive stress, reflux, vomiting, ear, throat or chest infections, allergies, intolerances, and/or constipation, these conditions may contribute to complex mealtimes. Caregivers who have experienced post-natal depression, anxiety or stress may also find mealtimes tricky for their family.

One of the key areas to explore to help improve mealtimes for a family, in conjunction with a health professional assessment, is the child's and caregiver's sensory preferences for mealtimes.

## **What are sensory preferences?**

Sensory preferences are the sights, sounds, types of touch, smells, tastes, temperatures, textures and types of movement we prefer in our day. Our sensory preferences influence what we detect, tolerate, are distracted or distressed by, avoid, or seek more of.

Think back to a memory of your favourite meal. Where were you, who were you with, what happened, what did you eat, how did you eat it, how did it make you feel and what do you remember?

Sensory preferences are unique to each individual as they are based on: sensory thresholds in the brain; genes; the surroundings; environment; feelings; interactions and experiences during each day **and** across a lifetime (i.e. memories). On top of this, pain, stress, trauma, fatigue, reflux, vomiting, infections, allergies, intolerances and constipation can make caregiver or a child more or less sensitive. Discovering sensory preferences takes time. We may have a different threshold for each sense and the amount of sensory information we detect, avoid, tolerate or seek more of can change during the day. Also, caregivers' sensory preferences often influence how they view, understand and react to their child and their child's behaviour at mealtimes.

## **How do sensory preferences affect mealtime behaviour?**

During mealtimes we use EVERY sense to help us notice, be calm, interact with others, socialise, be seated, use utensils (or not) and finally to eat. We continually use our senses to gather sensory information from our surroundings and our body to ensure our mealtimes are emotionally safe, successful and enjoyable.

Our sensory preferences directly influence our appetite, thoughts, feelings, memories, interactions with others and our behaviour. If our brain detects or remembers an experience that feels unsafe, worrisome or dangerous, our body might experience a **Danger Centre Response (i.e. fight, flight, freeze or fright response)**. These strong feelings might be associated with the sensory properties of certain foods, the surroundings or interactions and can have a very large impact on mealtime behaviour.

*Can you remember eating a food that caused you to feel unwell or vomit? Can you tolerate the smell, sight, taste or texture of that food now? How does it make you feel? What would you do if you were forced to eat even just a little bit? How would you behave?*

## **How can I help my child feel safe at snack and mealtimes?**

You can support your child's ability to stay calm as you take time to SENSE-atively tune in to their cues. A child's cues let us know how they are feeling and when they want more or less, or something different. When a caregiver tunes in to their child's sensory preferences, they can create a 'just right' experience that will feel emotionally safe for everyone. Days, weeks and months of ongoing safe and pleasurable mealtimes can positively shape a child's mealtime behaviour and the types or range of food they will eat.

## **Top tips for parents and caregivers of fussy eaters**

1. Begin by taking time to think about a feeding, snack or mealtime goal for your family. Think about a short-term goal that will help you and your child/ren over a 6 to 8 week time frame. You may have more than one goal that will help you move toward harmonious mealtimes for your whole family.
2. Reflect on your past mealtime experiences when you were a child and with your child. What were the things that made you happy at mealtimes and what made you feel anxious? How are mealtimes different when your child is calm and happy at mealtimes, compared with when they appear anxious and refuses food?
3. Become aware of your sensory preferences. Do you prefer quiet and calm mealtimes or do you prefer noisy conversation around a busy table? Do you enjoy mild flavours, or go after bold, fragrant and spicy flavours? Write down what you notice about all your family members.
4. Tune in, acknowledge and empathise with your child's sensory preferences, feelings and experiences of mealtimes, as well as your own. How are they similar? How are they different? How might this influence your mealtimes?
5. Consider the impact of your and your child's similarities and differences. How can the family mealtime cater to everyone's preferences and how they feel, while still enjoying the same meal?
6. Discover the capacity you have to shape your own and your child's feelings and behaviours around food through sensitive exploration of 'just right' challenges. Your child may not suddenly munch away on a broccoli stalk or piece of chicken, but slowly and surely they might talk about a 'just right' new food, touch it, smell it or even kiss or lick it. Your goal is more likely to be reached when guidance is gentle, there is **no pressure**, the environment is right and the many opportunities are emotionally safe and pleasurable.

***Denise and Gillian are the authors of Sense-ational Mealtimes. The book will help you work through the tips above in more detail and nurture mealtime harmony for your family. <http://sense-ationalmealtimes.com.au> is a go-to parent guide book supporting families with varying mealtime difficulties. The book can be ordered by visiting the website. Our Facebook page can be liked and shared to help more families with mealtime difficulties. Supportive information and links are shared gently through this page <http://facebook.com/pages/SENSE-ational-Mealtimes>***

**Gillian Griffiths** is an Occupational Therapist, senior practitioner, program manager, consultant and facilitator of professional development and caregiver programs. Gillian uses her vast experience and a broad range of evidence to make SENSE of complex mealtime difficulties.

**Dr Denise Stapleton** is an Accredited Practising Dietitian and Nutritionist and senior community dietitian. When Denise joined Gillian, they began anticipating new possibilities that their combined expertise would bring to families with mealtime difficulties.