

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT FEEDING FOR CHILDREN WITH SENSORY PROCESSING NEEDS



ARTICLES INCLUDE:

**Foundational Skill #2:
Sensory Processing**

**Sensory Preparation
before Family Meals**

**Kitchen Tools to
Support Sensory
Development**

FOUNDATIONAL SKILL #2: SENSORY PROCESSING

Eating is the MOST complicated sensory task that children do. We have to combine the information from all 8 of our sensory systems with every bite of food and then produce an adaptive motor response. Of course, everyone knows the five basic senses we learned in school: vision, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. These senses give us information about the world outside of our bodies. However, there are three other senses that we sometimes forget about, and they provide us with information about the inside of our body.

The other three senses are:

- Vestibular – Are we moving or still, upside down or right side up?
- Proprioceptive – Gives us information from our muscles and joints about where we are in space and how much strength to use
- Interoceptive – Helps us recognize things like sleep, appetite, pain, when we need to go to the bathroom, regulation of our body temperature, and emotion regulation.

Children with sensory challenges may have a hard time eating because their body isn't giving them accurate information about the food. Some kids experience the world in a 'too big' way where everything is too loud, too bright, too wet, or moving too fast. For other kids, it can be hard to take in enough information to pay attention to important things. Still, for others, their body doesn't give them accurate information, so they are frequently surprised during daily activities, which makes life very stressful. The tricky part about sensory challenges is that everyone is different and unique. Children let us know that food isn't working for their bodies in many different ways. For example, you may see the child gagging from the smell when making dinner, refusing to touch wet or powdery foods, being super brand specific about which foods they will eat, or avoiding whole categories of foods (wet foods, crunchy foods, etc.). The child may also overstuff their mouth, need to keep foods from touching each other on their plate or eat everything with ketchup.

Sensory Strategies:

- To help the child with sensory issues, involving them in **cooking** and meal preparation allows them to practice looking, smelling, and touching the food (even if it is only with a utensil), without the pressure and stress that a meal can some-



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times bring when everyone expects them to eat all the foods present. Depending on the age of the child, they may be able to tear lettuce for the salad, push the button on the blender, help stir dry ingredients when baking, or be the ‘chef’ for the night and cook the whole meal (even if it is chicken nuggets or macaroni & cheese).

- Provide kitchen **tools and utensils** for the child to use to interact with foods that they aren’t ready to eat yet. Food choppers, apple peelers, lettuce knives, cheese shredders, and egg slicers are all fun tools to use. Keep an eye out for tools at garage sales, at the dollar store, or give them as gifts around the holidays/birthdays.
- Think about the **setting** of the meal and how can you make the meal more calm and relaxing. Maybe dim the lights, put the dog in another room, and turn off the TV. What is the child looking at from their spot at the table? Could you move their ‘spot’ to face something a little more ‘boring’? Maybe instead of the child sitting in front of a big window to the neighborhood playground, they could be sat facing a fun picture of food or people eating.
- Make sure that their **chair** is adjusted correctly, so they are stable from a posture standpoint. The correct seated position is 90 degrees at the hips, 90 degrees at the knees and 90 degrees at the ankles. The correct height for the table surface is half way between the belly button and the breast nipples. So give them a hard book to sit on to get them up to the right height. Give them a back support that brings them far enough forward in the chair so their knees are at that 90 degree angle over the front edge of the chair. And, make sure they have a solid foot rest to plant their feet on. No dangling feet!

General Tip...

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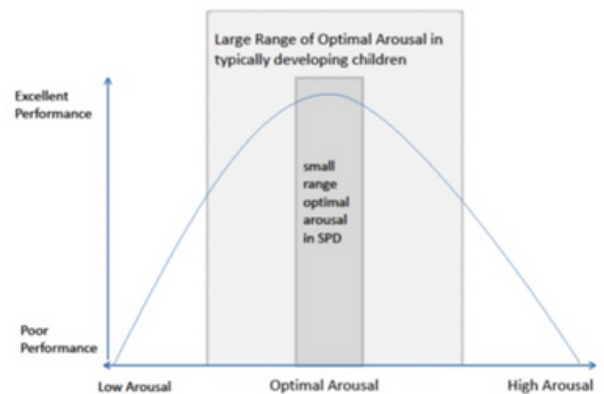




SENSORY PREPARATION BEFORE FAMILY MEALS

We frequently recommend for families to do some type of sensory preparation activity prior to a meal. The reason we like to recommend this type of activity before a meal or snack is to get the child in the “just right” arousal zone. The cues that we are looking for that tell us the child is outside of their 'just right' arousal zone are when the child gets rigid in their behavior or their behavior becomes chaotic. If the child you are working with often lives in that chaotic or rigid place, they may also need to be working with a sensory-based occupational therapist who can help that child expand their “just right” window. A sensory specialist OT can also help coach you and the parents on how to help that child get and stay in that just right arousal zone.

In addition, a sensory preparation activity often prepares a child to interact with the sensory aspects of food. If we help a child to prepare their body prior to a meal, they will be that much more successful when they sit down to eat.



Dr. Miller's Adaptation of the Yerkes-Dodson Law



So, what would a sensory preparation activity look like?

General Comments: The sensory preparation activity that you choose first needs to be based on this child's developmental age, while taking into consideration the child's chronological age too. Sensory preparation activities should also be chosen based on the child's sensory profile. Don't be surprised if these activities need to change from meal to meal for that exact same child. For example, a child may benefit more from a calming activity one day, and on another day the child needs a more alerting activity.

You ideally want to help client's family find an activity that is easy to do at their home, that the child enjoys, and that helps to get the child in a calm and "ready to learn" body space. These activities do not have to be complicated.

Handwashing - More than Hygiene

A handwashing routine can be a great sensory preparation activity. You can have the child push a heavy step stool or chair over to the sink. This pushing motion involves a sense called proprioception, which is essentially deep pressure into your muscles and joints. Proprioception is often calming for kids, and a lot of our children need to be calmed down prior to a meal (especially if mealtimes are hard and the child is feeling a bit nervous).

Once the child gets up to the sink, washing their hands is a great sensory preparation activity for when the child eventually gets to touching foods at their meal or snack. Think about all of the different inputs your hands feel when you wash your hands.

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First, your hands feel the water, and the water can fluctuate between different temperatures. Then, your hands feel the soap. Soap can feel different between different brands (i.e., foam, gel, bar soap), and can have different smells. Rubbing your hands together (depending on how much pressure you are using) while washing your hands can provide some great proprioceptive input. Then, drying off your hands has a variety of different touch inputs, too (you can change it up with different textures of towels or paper towels). All of these different sensations that the child's body experiences are great inputs to prepare their body for the food they are about to eat.



More Fun Ideas

For some children, just washing their hands will not be enough of a sensory preparation activity to help them get into their “just right” arousal zone.

Sometimes, kids will need a bigger input to help raise their arousal level to help get them to that "just right" place to be ready for learning. Remember that heavy work is also calming for a child who is in a high arousal state. Great heavy work activities include the following:

- climbing on an outdoor play structure
- riding a bike or tricycle
- crawling across big couch cushions
- wheelbarrow walking
- putting away groceries (including heavy items like a gallon of milk)
- pushing or pulling a box, bag, or cart with heavy items inside
- blowing bubbles
- swinging
- deep pressure touch (like a massage or putting on lotion)
- building a fort (small space as a calming environment)

If the child needs a little extra oomph in order for their arousal to increase, think about using “fast/blast” activities to get them in the “just right” learning space.

. These may include:

- listening to upbeat music
- playing in a water table (or bucket of water, the bathtub, or sink) with either warm or cold water
- hopscotch
- swinging with starting and stopping bursts

It is important for parents to learn to read the child’s cues while going through these activities. Make sure you are teaching them how to interpret what their child’s body is doing as communication about how the child is doing in any one moment.

Find activities that best work for your child/client and allow them to transition to the table easily. When we are in a good mind and body space (without too much stress or energy), we can do our best learning and that is what we ideally want when children are learning how to eat new foods.





KITCHEN TOOLS TO SUPPORT SENSORY DEVELOPMENT

Many kids with feeding difficulties can struggle with wet, sticky, rough foods. Many times, touching the food doesn't work well for their tactile system. While hopefully feeding therapy and occupational therapy are helping kids build a better sensory foundation, sometimes they need additional problem-solving strategies to help them engage with and explore new foods.

Let us show you how these three simple kitchen tools can give kids a way to explore foods in a way that works better for their body.

Silicon straws

For many kids with sensory difficulties, getting their fingers wet or touching purées makes them want to avoid them. While we always want to encourage touch, often if they are given some problem-solving ideas like “drinking” those same purées, kids with sensory-based feeding difficulties will be more onboard. Also, in case they aren't quite ready to taste the food, these straws are great for stirring, mixing, and just interacting with food. If they are close to the tasting steps but not quite ready to jump in yet, you might model sucking the puree halfway up the straw, then holding your tongue on the tip of the straw to hold the puree in.



Mini Food Choppers

Mini Food Choppers are not just our favorite tool for compensating for Oral Motor delays, but also for children with sensory challenges as well. So many foods can be too difficult for our kids to engage in touching. They are too bumpy, too cold, too slippery, or too wet. Whatever the sensory reason, Choppers allow them a way to still learn about many aspects of the food without having to touch it quite yet. Also, for children who like to jump and move, even when at the table, these Choppers are a great way to get their body pushing and helping break apart the foods too. Choppers are often a go-to strategy for helping a child get some organizing proprioceptive input while staying at the table.



Kid-safe toothpicks/ Small cocktail forks

Children with sensory issues often have a hard time feeling ready to get their hands in food, and so they will cling to the adult sized utensils to keep a safe distance from the food. Using a smaller utensil with a shorter handle is a great way to get kids closer to the food, and it allows them to easily work at the Interacts With step that they need. And these tools are great for working on new fine motor skills as well!

LOOKING FOR MORE IDEAS, FREE RESOURCES & PARENT AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES?

Visit the SOS Approach to Feeding website at
www.sosapproach.com

