

Managing Mealtimes

Background information

Children may have difficulties with organising and responding to information that comes in through the senses. Individuals can be oversensitive, under sensitive or both. This can often cause huge issues with mealtimes with the sights, smells and noise of the environment. Changes of routine and transitions between activities could also be a cause of issues for some children at these times.

There are several factors that you can consider when supporting a child with additional needs at mealtimes.

Location: Where do mealtimes take place? How do they get there?

Routines: What are the usual routines for mealtimes? (E.g. food service/choices/menus)

Seating: where/how long will the child sit?

Staffing: Which staff are normally part of the mealtime routines?

Strategies to try

Location: could the child be introduced to the place where they will eat outside of lunch time when it is not so busy? They will need to know where they are walking to and what will happen when they get there; objects of reference or pictures may help with this. You could try sitting them down and giving them a small favourite snack on their visits there.

Routines: find out about mealtimes and preferences from parents/carers beforehand. Parents could let you know what they think their child would like from the menu and also about any other routines or language used at home that can be adapted into their school routine. Are there any reasonable adjustments that could be made to avoid the child having to wait in lines/sit for long periods? Can the child access the choices of food alongside their peers? Allow the child to make choices to encourage communication and independence; the choices will need to be supported visually.

Seating: ensure that the child can sit with their feet on the floor as this will aid their concentration and control. From your observations work out if the child would prefer to sit with peers or if it would be better for them to sit a little away if this causes them distress? (Sitting with peers could be a long-term target for this child) The child may need a designated place, maybe marked with a decorated mat or laminated picture. Is there an area that has less “traffic” if the child struggles with sensory overload at mealtimes? If the child has developed a relationship with a peer, if

possible allow them to sit together to provide a positive role model. Children with additional needs will often really struggle with the concept of waiting, avoiding these triggers and providing a gradual introduction to these times will help to avoid negative behaviours from becoming established.

Staffing: all staff involved in lunch need to be aware of the child's needs. A short summary and agreement of strategies shared that is devised with parents and shared with lunchtime staff will really help this. If staff eat with the children, then the child could be positioned close by so that the adults could provide both encouragement and a role model.

Useful websites & further reading

<https://www.teachwire.net/news/fussy-eating-and-sen>

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/expert-opinion/autism-and-mealtime-therapists-top-ten-tips-success>