

# FEEDING PROBLEMS

## GOAL

To support parents in understanding and using gentle, evidence-based strategies to expand their child's diet while reducing stress around mealtimes.

## BACKGROUND

Many children, especially those with autism or developmental differences, struggle with eating a variety of foods. They may eat only specific textures, brands, or colors—or reject entire food groups. While this is common, it can be incredibly frustrating and concerning for parents.

Feeding challenges can arise from a range of factors, including sensory sensitivities, medical conditions, anxiety, or a history of negative experiences with food. That's why it's essential to approach feeding with patience, curiosity, and care. When feeding becomes a daily battle, it can impact not only your child's nutrition but also your family's well-being.

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Always check with your child's pediatrician before starting any feeding intervention. If your child isn't maintaining a healthy weight, or if you're concerned about nutritional needs, you may need to work with a BCBA® trained in feeding interventions or a feeding specialist. Some strategies in this lesson are designed for children who are eating enough to sustain growth and health.

With that support in place, you can begin using gentle, research-based strategies to build a more positive mealtime experience.

# START WITH WHAT THEY ALREADY EAT

When it comes to feeding challenges, you don't have to start from scratch. One of the most effective ways to expand your child's diet is to begin with foods they already eat regularly. These familiar foods give you a foundation to work from and can guide your choices when introducing new foods.

## **OBSERVE AND BUILD FROM YOUR CHILD'S CURRENT DIET**

Take some time to list the foods your child eats consistently. Think about the sensory characteristics of these foods—what they have in common—and how you can use that information to guide food expansion.

- Texture – Are the foods crunchy, smooth, soft, dry, or chewy?
- Temperature – Are they usually served warm, cold, or room temperature?
- Taste – Do they tend to be salty, sweet, mild, or bland?
- Color and Appearance – Do they prefer foods that are one color, no mixed textures, or a consistent shape?
- Packaging/Presentation – Do they insist on a particular brand, plate, or utensil?



Start by choosing new foods that are very similar to preferred ones. For example, if your child eats one brand of chicken nuggets, you might begin by offering a new brand that looks and smells similar. No pressure—just offer it alongside the familiar food and let your child explore at their own pace.

## **KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT**

It's normal for your child to reject new foods at first. This doesn't mean the strategy isn't working—it just means they need more time and opportunities to get comfortable.

## **PARTNER WITH YOUR BCBA®**

Your BCBA® can help you analyze your child's food preferences and guide you in creating a gradual, individualized food expansion plan that fits your child's needs.

# SUPPORT YOUR CHILD THROUGH THE PROCESS

Introducing new foods can feel like a big leap—for both you and your child. Rather than expecting them to eat something new right away, think of your role as guiding them through small, manageable steps. Each step is a win and builds the foundation for future progress.

## BUILD COMFORT FIRST

Before your child is ready to taste a new food, they need time to feel safe and curious around it.



Start by placing the food near them without pressure to eat it.



Let them explore it on their own terms—smelling, poking, or even just looking.



Talk about the food in a casual, positive way (e.g., "That strawberry is really red!").



Show interest yourself—eat it alongside them without asking them to do the same.

## BUILD ACCEPTANCE GRADUALLY

As your child gets more comfortable, you can begin encouraging more interaction—but stay flexible and go at their pace.



Move from looking to touching, and from touching to bringing the food closer to their face.



Give small, specific praise for each step (e.g., "You touched it! That's awesome!").



Let them decide when they're ready to try more.



Keep reinforcers available, but use them to celebrate effort, not force the next step

## REINFORCE PROGRESS

Each step forward matters—even if it seems small. Your encouragement, patience, and praise help your child build trust in the process.

# REINFORCE THE RIGHT WAY

When introducing new foods, it's important to make the entire experience as positive as possible. Reinforcement should be used to celebrate progress—not to pressure your child. The goal is to increase their willingness to engage with food by making the process feel safe, supported, and rewarding.

## CHOOSE EFFECTIVE REINFORCERS

Every child is different, and what motivates one child may not work for another. Think about what truly excites or comforts your child.

- Favorite small treats (unrelated to meals)
- Access to a preferred toy or activity
- Short time using a favorite app or watching a video
- Playful interaction (e.g., silly song, high-five, dance)
- Extra time doing something they love
- Calm, encouraging praise

## USE REINFORCEMENT STRATEGICALLY

Use reinforcement immediately and consistently for small steps toward the goal. This builds momentum and confidence.

- Reinforce any step your child takes in the shaping process
- Make reinforcement predictable—your child should know what to expect
- Start with frequent reinforcement, then fade as they become more comfortable
- Avoid using essential foods as reinforcers if your child depends on them nutritionally
- Offer a "menu" of reinforcers to give your child choice and control

## AVOID COMMON PITFALLS

Reinforcement is powerful, but it can lose its impact if used ineffectively or inconsistently.

- Don't delay reinforcement—timing matters
- Avoid using reinforcement as a bribe ("If you eat it, THEN you get...")
- Don't remove reinforcement because progress is slow
- Don't pressure your child with reinforcement ("You don't get this unless you do that")

## WHAT MOTIVATES YOU CHILD?

# TAKE TIME, STAY CONSISTENT

Progress in feeding doesn't happen overnight. It takes time, patience, and a consistent approach. This page is here to help you reflect on what's working and where to go next—so you can stay steady without feeling stuck.

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## WHAT YOU MIGHT ALREADY BE DOING WELL

Look through these practices and check off any that feel true for you. Celebrate the progress you're already making.

- Offering a variety of foods without pressure
- Staying calm when your child refuses food
- Using small steps to introduce new foods
- Reinforcing your child's efforts—not just eating
- Giving your child time to explore food
- Keeping mealtimes low-pressure and predictable

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## WHAT YOU MIGHT TRY NEXT

These strategies can help keep your momentum going or give you a fresh place to start.

- Write down all the foods your child currently eats to find patterns
- Introduce a new food that's similar in texture, taste, or temperature
- Pair food exploration with a fun reinforcer
- Try a shaping approach—focus on progress, not perfection
- Talk with your BCBA® about adjusting your current plan
- Plan low-pressure exposure outside of mealtime (e.g., pretend cooking, toy food, grocery store visit)

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What small step could you take this week to support your child's feeding progress?



**Success is the sum  
of small efforts,  
repeated day in  
and day out.**

~Robert Collier