



EMPOWERED ED 'Keep It Simple' Series

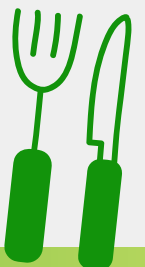


Overcoming SPD Eating Issues

TIPS FOR EDS & PARENTS



THE EMPOWERED EDUCATOR • JODIE CLARKE





A Little About Me



Hi, I'm Jodie! I am a Mum in Australia to 3 girls – twins Ruby & Tara and my adult daughter Ashleigh. And I love the possibilities of early learning!

I'm passionate about helping educators simplify their documentation and planning and also enjoy more time engaging with the children in their care through simple play-based activities & environments.

I enjoy creating blog posts, free tools and easy to use resources and training for educators, leaders and coordinators by drawing upon my 30 years experience in this profession.

I know what support educators really need because I have walked in your shoes. This profession is challenging enough so I aim to simplify not overcomplicate! My resources walk through the basics so you can take action!

The Facts

- I hold an Associate Diploma in Education (Child care)
- I hold an Advanced Certificate in Child Care
- I hold a Bachelor of Human Services Degree
- I have worked as an Assistant, RoomLeader, Director, FDC Coordinator, IHC Coordinator, OSHC Coordinator, Occasional Care Coordinator, Project Manager, Service Manager, Family Day Care Educator, Presenter and Speaker in the Early Childhood and Community and Family Services fields.
- I have been writing and editing my blog now for over 6 years.
- I am the author of many E- Book resources for educators, A Postnatal Depression Workbook (& DVD) and a picture book for children.
- I have developed and presented webinars and online courses to support early childhood educators in their role.

Thanks for placing your trust in me!

Jodie Clarke



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Overcoming Sensory Food Issues - A Guide for Educators

It can be very easy for people (including educators and parents) to say that a child will eat if they are hungry and you shouldn't pander to a fussy eater but in my experience that is not at all helpful and frankly disrespectful to both adult and child. And that's why I thought this topic was an important one to include in my 'Keep it Simple Series for Empowered Educators'!

I have personally faced an ongoing struggle with helping one of my twins, to eat well over the years - especially in the first few years of her life. She has aspects of a sensory processing disorder (SPD) and this unfortunately places her in another category entirely from the usual picky and fussy eating toddler stage that we all know so well! Over the years I have had many emails from concerned parents and early childhood professionals also experiencing similar challenges with their children and not sure how to help after being told they are just 'fussy eaters'. I want to help change that by sharing some of the strategies and tips that helped our family cope with an oral eating aversion and all that came with it!

I first encourage you to remember that all children are individuals just like adults – they have different needs and feelings about what is comfortable for their own body. The next time someone gives the 'helpful' advice to ignore the child's eating habits or not offer any other food choices I urge you to follow your own instincts and dig a little deeper for the sake of the child (and family) involved.

Although I am by no means a professional in this area, an occupational therapist or indeed any kind of expert in SPD issues I thought it might help to share some of what has worked for me not only as a parent but also as an educator now aware of what some children in care might be experiencing at meal and snack times. The frustration, the fear and the tears...from both child and adult!



Sensory Processing & Oral Aversion

So what do I mean when I talk about an oral aversion when it comes to food? I first became concerned when my baby daughter who had happily been eating purees suddenly seemed to have a lot of difficulty with any food that was lumpy or of a certain texture. When I say 'difficulty' I mean she would constantly gag and frequently fill her highchair tray with vomit. She looked terrified. I heard it all...she's not ready for solids, you are feeding her too much, she is intolerant (to pretty much everything!), it's because she is bottle not breastfed or she is just fussy and doesn't like lumps. She and I both began to approach mealtimes with a sense of fear and apprehension. It was not ideal obviously. I didn't want to leave her with anyone because I didn't trust that she would not choke on her own vomit and frankly they didn't understand. I actually began to think I was going a little nuts even though I knew my parent and educator instincts were right. There was something wrong and it seemed to be a sensory issue. But what could I do about it?

I felt so helpless just watching her. I could see she was becoming too scared of food to eat it. I began to research and read. I observed what happened when she touched certain textures with parts of her body, when she smelt something different, when she tasted foods. She vomited when her toes first touched sand, gagged and screamed when she touched cooked spaghetti and was not comfortable touching paint or anything messy with her hands as she grew older.

Many people continually told me that she just needed to get used to her gag reflex but the Mum and early childhood educator instinct in me knew there was something more to it. She seemed scared to touch food and when she did she often lifted it to her chin or cheeks to feel and smell before touching it to her lips. I recalled seeing other children I had worked with over the years do this too. I had an awful time trying to get her to pick up finger food and she seemed to be getting fixated on certain foods she would eat.....one of which was a jar of pureed baby food I had once offered on a day outing. I soon realised she was only eating the food she hadn't gagged and vomited back up in the last few months. Her diet became very limited and it was very frustrating trying to find something different that she might eat other than rice crackers, cruskits and pureed food.

As a Mum and educator I was becoming more and more concerned...and frustrated. Her twin was now eating lumpy foods and even trying some cubed meat and other finger foods. Little did I know it then ***but our journey with food and SPD sensitivities had begun!***

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Slowly I had begun to realise that this wasn't just fussy eating....she often seemed to experience real terror when offered some foods. There was a lot of staring at foods on the plate but not much touching or eating.

Around this time we were finally referred to an occupational therapist and a dietitian. The dietitian wanted her to begin taking a supplement formula everyday but I had to inform her that she would not drink anything she wasn't used to...she would know instantly it was different and then most likely gag and vomit. She did.....repeatedly...so we moved onto a supposedly odour and taste free version...it was rejected too. It was at this moment that I began to realise I needed to do some research of my own and work with her here at home in the hope that maybe one day she would be able to enjoy a meal as much as her sister.....and I wouldn't have to create something different for her every day with the hope it would be tasted (let alone eaten!)

I'm not going to sugar coat this...it was a tough road. But over time I put together a toolkit of strategies that seemed to work (or at least help!). Some I researched, some I worked on with the help of an occupational therapist, some I just tried of my own accord....Every child is different and therefore this isn't a one solution for everyone type of situation but it is my hope that through sharing some of the strategies that did work I can help educators, parents and carers to at least consider that there might be something else going on with the term fussy eater starts being thrown around.



What can educators do?

1. Be open to the possibility that oral eating aversions are real - no matter the age of the child or adult.
2. Learn as much as you can about sensory processing and the different challenges and issues that can arise for children. Be aware of some red flags to look for.
3. Write or record observations as you normally would.
4. Talk with the parents/carers about how their child eats at home, what you have observed and if necessary make a referral to a health professional. I found an occupational therapist the most helpful and knowledgeable about all things sensory!
5. Try some of the strategies I've listed below and share what you are doing with your coordinator, director or leader as well as the parents/carers.
6. Be consistent, try to keep mealtimes a happy event and keep trying different things!



Eating Strategies to try.

1. USE A ROUTINE TO ADVANTAGE

We worked on developing a washing hands and face routine before mealtimes using a facewasher with quite a firm touch..especially around the mouth and face...this prepares for the stimulus of the meal ahead. It is also a signal that mealtime is about to start so the child has a little time to prepare her thoughts and feelings.

2. BE AWARE OF BALANCE, POSTURE AND SUPPORT

Take notice of the children's posture when eating. When working with my daughter I noticed she wasn't yet able to touch the footstep part of the highchair so we tied a rolled towel around the bottom that she was able to rest her feet on. This had a marked improvement on the amount of time she would spend sitting in the chair without wriggling and growing distracted. I really think this tip helped her enormously and she felt more secure and 'balanced'. We also used a few old phonebooks on the floor under the girls child sized table and chairs so she could rest her feet on them and maintain good posture and balance.

I have since used this technique with children in my family day care service as well and noticed that all children ate better when their feet were well grounded – even the babies and younger toddlers in highchairs – make sure you find ways to help their feet connect with a hard surface. It really helps with the wriggling and fussing while eating – try it!



3. START WITH WHAT THEY DO EAT....AND BUILD FROM THERE

We began starting our girls meals with a hard 'munchable' as I observed that my Ruby seemed most comfortable with crunchy, hard food items. It also 'warmed up' her mouth for chewing. She took a particular liking to little round rice crackers and rusks....and still enjoys these many years later. Instead of trying to fight this I learnt that she needs these **'safe'** foods on her plate and I used them to begin adding some scrapes of different spreads and textures...sometimes it worked...sometimes not!

Ruby liked round, crunchy crackers...I'm not sure why but I used this to advantage by introducing other crunchy, round shaped foods! I mashed and grated up vegetables and added rice (which she wouldn't eat on its own), grated cheese (which she wouldn't touch if by itself) and then gradually some beef and chicken mince as well as lentils.

It seemed if they were rolled into little patties or balls, coated in panko crumbs and fried with a dash of salt...she would eat them. I was so excited to finally see her eating some meat, cheese and vegies. The texture was obviously key for her but I did try to make each type of patty slightly different in shape so she understood that she was actually trying something different and didn't fall back into wanting just that same food each night.



What do your children like to eat? Can you modify it to include different foods into a texture and smell they will tolerate or at least touch and try?.

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4. USE FORKS AS A TOOL TOWARDS TOUCH

We introduced forks and began loading them with different foods that previously Ruby would not touch. We started with foods she liked so she could enjoy the new experience of the fork and then we began introducing foods that weren't as favoured. To my absolute surprise this one began to work really well! She wasn't eating the food but she would at least pick it up using the fork and touch it to her mouth...a small victory.

At this time I also decided to add a few little bento type forks to introduce a novelty factor and these worked wonderfully! I brought these ones from Ebay but I have seen similar types all over the net! They are an inexpensive tool and I highly recommend them for those children that won't pick up certain foods. Clean paddlepop sticks also work well for little hands to hold.



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5. USE THE 'DIP DIP' TECHNIQUE

You can encourage children to mix some of the textures they do enjoy with some they are unsure of. For example, with our daughter we modelled dipping her favourite rice crackers into a slightly lumpy puree. This was quite successful for getting her to try some new foods that she wouldn't take a spoonful of. We used this technique so often that she began to use the phrase 'dip, dip' before trying something with lots of encouragement. I remember I was over the moon when this first worked with a runny boiled egg and some toast fingers...she loves them now...as long as she can 'dip, dip' with her toast and not touch the actual egg.

So this strategy is basically just using favourite crunchy foods to dip into less favoured or new foods...this has been very successful with toddlers through to school age children so far!

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6. EAT TOGETHER AS A GROUP AND MODEL EATING

Try to eat with the children as often as possible as they will often watch others and then try similar things on their own plate. You can also model how to use different tools to touch and taste the food without using fingers. It really is amazing what a little modelling can do!

7. TRY TO OFFER LOTS OF MESSY FUN AND PLAY

I personally think it is crucial to do as much messy, sensory play with children as possible right from an early age (yes even babies!) so if you can try and include a little each day...it doesn't have to be a huge activity with lots of preparation...just something that offers and opportunity to experience different textures, colours and smells...as well as having lots of fun along the way!

The messy play offers children the chance to get more comfortable with mess on their hands and to become more comfortable with the different textures of slimy, soft, rough, bumpy and hard ...all the textures of food! Try some of my easy sensory play ideas for all ages in the Empowered Ed Simple Series Sensory Play book to help you make a start.



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8. USE FOOD AS PLAY

As well as using the strategy of messy activities I have often provided activities using food as play...the aim is for children to see food as 'fun' - not scary, and experience different textures and tastes while playing. We have done some painting with pureed apple, yoghurt, mashed banana and jelly. Sometimes I also add their favourite little farm animals and people and we 'feed' the animals whatever it is we are playing with...and if some is eaten by the children too...then all the better!!!

I know many early childhood educators are not comfortable with the idea of using food in play but **sometimes you have to challenge your own perspective and go with what is best for the child at the time** and for my Ruby and many other sensory sensitive children I have worked with in my capacity as educator it has been a lifesaver – a real stepping stone to actually being able to pick up a food and eat it because they are already comfortable and familiar. The sensory fear has been removed because they have already had fun playing with it. But as always the decision lies with you and your personal philosophy and perhaps the service you are working within. I just like to give another perspective to the using food in play debate as it truly can be a very useful and helpful strategy.



One of the food play activities I use the most is cold cooked spaghetti with a little oil added. Sometimes food colouring to engage and excite the senses towards wanting to touch and explore. The picture below shows Ruby touching and sniffing the spaghetti then 'painting' with it. After I offered the activity a few more times she actually placed some in her mouth then was able to chew and swallow without gagging and vomiting - something that always happened previously when I gave her spaghetti in a bowl to eat.



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Another favourite is making 'face masks' using food items like oats, banana, avocado and similar. The children help to mash and mix the ingredients then we dip fingers in and spread on faces before washing off with facecloths and warm water. Try to gradually increase the time the 'mask' stays on the face each time the activity comes out and always have a bucket of water close by for those who need to wash hands straight away.



When playing with food you might need to first introduce simple tools that will allow children to feel more comfortable exploring and investigating the sensory materials. In this photo you can see Ruby exploring a flour tray...she didn't need to touch it straight away with her fingers but her curiosity was piqued! She used many different 'handles' before she began to use her fingers to explore the flour.

9. GRADUALLY INCREASE SIZE OF FOOD

Ruby used to be very wary of chunks in food so I continued to puree fruit to mix through her yoghurt and custard. This strategy is about taking small steps consistently, for example...you might start with a smooth puree then progress to coarsely grating some apple to stir through the yoghurt and then finely chopping so you are gradually working towards them being able to eat chunks and lumps within smooth foods without spitting them back out at you!

You can try this with any number of foods really....it's all a step in the right direction! You just have to remember to do things like this **very gradually**...even though it is so frustrating. If we try to hurry the process they might gag or vomit and then you are back to square one so quickly and they have possibly formed a distrust for that food again!

10. USE DISTRACTION

I learnt very early on that Ruby eats better and sits in her chair for longer if she is distracted. I know this goes against many parenting and educator best practice principles but we often eat with the TV on...usually one of the children's favourite shows or DVDs. It helps enormously to keep those who might fear the touch and taste of food still trying to eat. Sometimes a small favourite book or squeezable toy also helps. Whatever works for your circumstances and child involved but distraction helps us immensely!

11. MAKE THE SAME FOOD A LITTLE DIFFERENT

Some months Ruby would only want to eat crackers and jar puree but the OT warned against offering them in the same way all the time or eventually she would become bored or tired of those foods and they would also be rejected. We had to find new ways of presenting the limited foods she liked so that her plate always looked different...yet safe and familiar to her in some way. You might want to do the same or talk to the parents about this option.



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Sometimes we changed the colour of the food, sometimes I changed the taste by adding seasoning...herbs or even salt which is something that seemed to make food more palatable for Ruby (only tiny amounts of course and not something I would have normally added to a child's food or do without a parents permission). I have also played around with the texture of the purees by adding things such as oats and lentils to thicken them slightly.

The idea is ***not to make the food look or taste so different that it becomes unfamiliar*** and therefore rejected....just make it a little bit different from last time.

You can try using cookie cutters or sandwich cutters to make bread look more interesting as sandwiches are a texture many children find difficult. Adding a little whimsy to a boring piece of bread can sometimes encourage a little touching, tasting and even chewing!

Cutters similar to the ones you see in the photos also put a little imprint of the shape/animal onto the bread which add to the novelty value and make something seem a little different!

Again...I brought these from Ebay quite inexpensively! They were worth every cent too!!



12. UTILISE A MOULI, BLENDER AND FREEZER

Some children will not pick up cubes or slices of meat but they will eat it pureed or moulised... sometimes! The little meat and vegie cakes I mentioned previously were my biggest success with meat but I also found that blending some of a stew or meat dish and mixing it with some blended a little coarser can give some good results....if they then get that spoon to mouth! For many children with these oral issues it can be the actual texture of the lump that makes them spit it out....so as always start gradually and slowly mix half and half until there is more lumpy than blended.

For the parents reading this use a freezer if you can as a tool for lessening those stress levels at meal times. By freezing batches of patties and other homemade foods that you have had some success with you can then just pull a few out each night and add them to a 'new food' on the plate. This way I you will at least know they will (hopefully!) eat something...and perhaps try the new food too. It gives you a little breathing space from that feeling of 'I just cooked all afternoon and they didn't even eat it trauma!'

By freezing foods in batches you can also keep trying them regularly even if they weren't touched the first time around!

The reason I like using a Mouli is because you have 3 different sized hole plates that can be inserted to use. You can gradually progress to the plate with the larger holes which means the food is becoming lumpier and more textured. Hopefully you can then move onto just roughly fork mashed meat before finally getting to the stage of offering meat as a finger food!

13. TRY NEW PRESENTATIONS OF FOOD

Try getting a *little bit more creative* with the presentation of food on the plate and in lunchboxes. Although I have seen some wonderful Bento type lunches across the web (and been very inspired)parents, carers and educators don't usually have the time to go to that amount of effort so keep it simple - no need to make it Pinterest worthy!



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Ruby is in school now and I still choose to pack a few different choices for each meal whether for home or school rather than overwhelm her with big serves of something she probably wasn't going to touch. Try taking foods out of large lunchboxes and offering to children on plates with different segments/sections as often children don't like certain textures touching and smaller amounts of food in smaller spaces is usually more enticing when deciding what to try touching or tasting! Include something new and something they have touched before but not actually chewed and swallowed successfully yet!



14. LET GO OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS

I was one of those Mum's that loved making baby purees and all sorts of homemade food bursting with goodness...the trouble was that it often wasn't eaten by Ruby once we moved past the puree stage!

After talking with the OT and dietitian I learnt that it was ok to let go a little and just focus on what Ruby liked and would eat rather than the fact that she wouldn't eat my homemade chicken nuggets but would actually try a shop brought one straight away! As educators it can also be difficult not to feel judgemental about what is coming in a child's lunchbox each day but make sure to dig a little deeper first - there may be a reason they are packing those foods - is it the texture, seasoning, smell or only thing they will eat? Why? Observe and reflect before judging!

I learnt that a little salt makes things a lot more palatable for Ruby and this is ok. I learnt to let go of the feeling that I was a bad mother because she wouldn't eat my homemade food!

The most important thing at this stage is that the child with oral aversions to food eats....that they try, they sniff, they feel safe....then you can move onto the foods you really want them to eat.

15. PRAISE AND ENCOURAGE FOR ANY INTERACTION WITH FOOD

Always remember that *interacting with, smelling and touching foods are important steps* towards eating. It's so important that we always praise and encourage our sensory kids for interacting with food even if it doesn't make the mouth each time. I know it's hard to do at times...especially when you are despairing of them ever eating a 'proper' meal which hasn't taken hours of agonising over on your part beforehand...but it's important to both child and parent/educator to acknowledge, praise and move forward!

It can be a long and lonely road trying to get a child who has SPD issues to eat a balanced diet...or even a diet of any kind to be honest. **They aren't just fussy and they won't just snap out of it....**but if we work together as educators and parents to become more aware, try different strategies, move outside our own comfort zones and keep taking steps forward that child who right now can't swallow a strand of slippery spaghetti without gagging might one day be sitting at a table eating spaghetti bolognese with sauce smeared all over their face.

I've seen it happen and trust me when I say it is a beautiful moment to experience!

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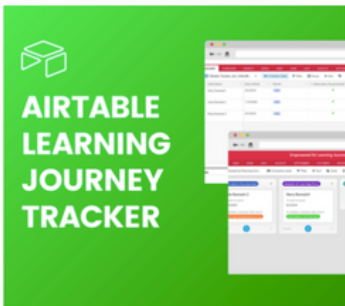




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