

# LADC Behavior Handout

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## Feeding Interventions

Learn how to help your child improve the variety or quantity of food they eat through these interventions.

## Pairing Positive Reinforcement

Learn how to add positive reinforcement to your new feeding interventions in order to create faster and lasting behavior change.



## How to Help Your Child with Feeding Difficulties

Most parents have experienced feeding problems with their children before. Research shows that 25% of all children have feeding problems and 80% of children with developmental disabilities have feeding disorders. First, it is necessary to have a medical evaluation to determine whether there is a medical reason for their feeding problems. Your child's feeding difficulties might be due to medical problems, acid reflux, allergies, or constipation/diarrhea. If a medical professional determines there are no known causes, then it is possible that your child's feeding problems may have been learned or acquired and can be improved through behavioral interventions. If your child does not respond to some of the interventions described in this information, it may be beneficial to seek out help from a feeding specialist or feeding team. More specifically, if your child's feeding problems are causing a delay in development or their diet is severely deficient in caloric intake/nutritional content, seek medical assistance immediately. Another sign of the need for specialized services would be if your child frequently coughs while eating, engages in choking or gagging behaviors on a regular basis with foods/drinks, or your child has oral motor delays.

Some children that may benefit from the following behavioral interventions are picky eaters, children with food selectivity, children with difficulty processing different textured foods, children with autism, and children with anxiety surrounding food.

**Help your child expand the types of foods they eat!  
Get started this week!**

# Feeding Interventions

First, it is important to determine the reason behind why your child has food selectivity or engages in difficult behaviors at mealtime. There are three different functions that could be present during food refusal, temper tantrums at mealtimes, or gagging/vomiting when presented with non-preferred foods. It is important to know which reason your child might be engaging in behavioral problems at mealtime to best determine which intervention to begin.

## **Gain Access to Preferred Items**

Another function of their behavior could be to gain access to other preferred items. Maybe your child doesn't prefer eating vegetables but only wants macaroni and cheese. If the child knows that they will eventually get the preferred food item, then they may continue engaging in problem behaviors until they get their preferred food.

## **Gain Attention**

One reason they may engage in these behaviors may be to gain attention from their caregiver. This could be happening with tantrums, food refusals, or even gagging/vomiting. Maybe your child likes the attention they receive when they need "help" eating their food.

## **Escape or Avoid**

The final reason they might be engaging in behavior problems surrounding feeding could be that they are trying to escape or avoid an unpleasant situation or non-preferred food item.

## **Set the Stage for Successful Eating**

Make sure all meals are happening at a table, with your child in an appropriate chair. Do not allow distractions at dinner such as watching TV or playing on an iPad. Create a predictable mealtime schedule so that meals are more consistent and less anxiety producing. Present your child with less food on their plate so it is not as overwhelming. Decrease the amount of times they can eat outside of mealtime. Evaluate the number of beverages they drink besides water (especially milk or juice as it may be filling). One thing to remember with all of these interventions and foods is that a child needs to try something 10-15 times before they like it so repeated presentation of new foods is good for any child or feeding problem. Constantly model what foods you're wanting your child to eat so they see repeated exposure to the food item. Additionally, children respond well to peer models. Have one of their good friends or someone they look up to help model eating the new food.

## **Reoffer Non-Preferred Foods**

If you suspect that your child is engaging in difficult behaviors during meal times to either gain access to preferred food items or to escape non-preferred food items, then this intervention may be helpful for your child. If your child refuses to eat non-preferred food items, you will continue to present the food in front of your child, not allowing them to escape from the non-preferred food. For example, if your child vomits on the food being presented, you can give them a new plate with the same food to try again. If your child runs away from the table, physically bring them back to the table. If your child refuses to eat, do not give them a new food item. Instead, let your child know that when they are hungry for a snack later, you will present the same food again. This will help your child understand that their behaviors will not get them their preferred food item or allow them to escape from non-preferred food items.

## Successive Approximation

This strategy is great to use with children who have extreme protests to non-preferred food even near them or on their plate. You want to meet the child at the level they are at and slowly make the task more difficult for them. Start at the level they are most comfortable with the food and move to the next step when they appear comfortable with the previous step.

Create lots of opportunities for exposure to each step so that they become more comfortable quickly. Here is a list of possible steps, remember start them on the level they are at:

- Allows the food on table without protest
- Child allows the food on plate
- Child touches food with a finger
- Child picks up the food and touches it to their lips (Kiss)
- Child touches the food to their tongue (Lick)
- Child takes a bite of the food (start with crumb sized bite and then move slowly to larger bites)

More steps can be added if the child is becoming stuck on a particular step. Maybe you can add touching to teeth, making bite marks, or taking a bite and spitting it back out after. Some children progress through the steps very quickly for new foods, while other children need daily practice for weeks on each step. When picking new foods to add, offer foods that the rest of the family consumes regularly. Consider the foods that the child currently eats or find foods that are similar in taste or texture.

## Pairing Positive Reinforcement with the Feeding Interventions

Do you have anything rewarding for your child after they try a bite of a new food? One way to provide reinforcement is to give your child a bite of their preferred food item as a reward for taking a bite or engaging with non-preferred food items. If using this method, only allow your child to have the preferred food when taking bites of new foods during mealtime. Sometimes reinforcement is the only way to motivate some children to eat different foods. Sometimes your child may not be motivated by food. Instead find something that does motivate them!

If your child is not motivated by any food, then use a toy or game to help motivate your child to eat. For each bite, they get to play with a special toy for 3 minutes. Could you have your child take a bite of food and then you read a page from their favorite book?

If you don't want the reinforcer to disrupt your mealtime, have your child earn stickers or tokens during mealtime that can be exchanged for iPad time after dinner. For many children, the decrease in feeling of hunger or the taste of the food is not rewarding enough for your child to eat; therefore, we supplement with some external motivation that can be faded over time. Try the fun charts for tracking their success like "dot-to-dot charts" or fun sticker charts.

Whatever reinforcer you choose, use it *only* for mealtimes so that it maintains its effectiveness. The use of sticker charts or token economies can be successful for children age four and older. Additionally, it is important to remember that you want the reward to be greater than the demand. Start out with small goals so that they can be successful. Start out with a small goal such as one bite gives them 15 minutes of iPad time. Then when they are successful, you can switch to 15 minutes of iPad time for 2-3 bites. Slowly increase the demand. When starting with a new food again, you will need to decrease the demand before slowly increasing it again.