

ABUHB ARFID

(Avoidant and Restrictive Food Intake Disorder) Service

Messy Food Play

Information for families

If you are given this information by a professional it does not necessarily mean that your child has a diagnosis of ARFID. All children will benefit from these strategies.

The Disgust Response

When we see something we don't like, or smell something we find unpleasant, we become uncomfortable and display this through wrinkling out nose, gagging, retching, or even vomiting – this is known as the disgust response. The more you increase stress and anxiety around food and mealtimes, the more extreme the disgust response will be from your child.

- Some foods are so disgusting that the child, or adult, cannot even be near them or in the same room. This is also true of other people eating.
- We would not recommend forcing or bribing your child into eating a food that they cannot put into their mouth as this is likely to bring on too high a level of disgust for the child. Starting with being in the same room as a new food, then playing with/ touching it, will help to make eventually trying a new food much more acceptable.
- If your child is really against eating a new food, stay calm! Eat it yourself instead.
- Do not put a new food on the plate together with a safe food, as the child might then reject that safe food due to seeing it with a new food/ touching a new food.



Messy Food Play

A good way to gradually introduce your child to new foods is to allow them to engage in messy food play; interacting with food in a fun and low-pressure setting without the expectation of having to eat new foods. Below are a few examples of activities to try:

- **Dolly/Tea set:** mash up foods or combine foods e.g. stir yogurt into cereal and feed to dolly.
- **Farm/Animals:** make tracks in tomato sauce etc. with animals and tractors. Hide animals under large pasta shells and gradually make it messier.
- **Pictures:** use different types of food/non-foods to make pictures of flowers, faces, shapes etc.
- **Cars/Tracks:** spread something messy on a tray or table and build roads with spaghetti, penne pasta etc. Use broccoli or cauliflower for trees, drive cars along road to make tracks.
- **Threading:** thread penne pasta onto laces or straws.
- **Colour Matching:** mix different types of fruits and vegetables together e.g. raisins and grapes - sort by colour. Broccoli and carrots - sort by colour. Move on to wetter/mushier types e.g. bananas, sliced tomatoes.



When to Progress to Eating

Once your child is happy to touch and explore the food, progress to smelling, licking, biting and tasting one small piece.

Messy food is fun! Sessions should be done away from where the child normally eats and not carried out at mealtimes. It is important this is fun for both you and your child, so be sure to have messy play in a place that is easy to clean up and comfortable for you.

When you think your child is ready to have a food introduced at mealtimes, place the targeted food on a separate plate a little distance away from your child. There should be no expectation to eat it the first time it is introduced. Gradually move it closer and when you think your child is ready, place it on their plate. Encourage your child to tolerate the food on their plate then lick or taste it when they are ready. This may have to be done gradually over a few mealtimes.

Tips for introducing messy food play:

- Start with dry foods e.g. pasta and progress to wet foods (cooked pasta). Then encourage mixing foods/textures together.
- Vary temperature of food if possible.
- Encourage child to assist with tidying up/washing up if possible.
- Keep activities non-threatening.



An Example of Progressing from Messy Play to Eating

Target foods: *pasta and sauce*

Start with **dry pasta** (variety of shapes and colours):

- Choose activities – threading, pictures, patterns etc.

Progress to **cooked pasta**:

- Continue with play activities.
- Encourage smelling it.

When happy to smell it progress to **licking** it.

When happy to lick it progress to **biting** it (Doesn't have to swallow).

When happy to bite it progress to **eating** one small piece.

Then tolerate on plate at snack/ mealtimes.

Progress to **pasta with sauce** (e.g. tomato ketchup):

- Continue with play activities to allow your child to become familiar with the smell and texture of it.
- Encourage smelling it.

When happy to smell it progress to **licking** it.

When happy to lick it progress to **biting** it (Doesn't have to swallow).

When happy to bite it progress to **eating** one small piece.

Then tolerate on plate at snack/ mealtimes.



Information adapted from NHS Tayside Occupational Therapy Service Messy Play Ideas.

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