

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH SEND THROUGH NUTRITION

A PARENT AND CARER INFORMATION LEAFLET

Why Nutrition Matters?

Good nutrition supports children's growth, learning, concentration, energy levels, sleep, immune function and overall wellbeing. While there is no single diet that can treat SEND conditions, healthy eating can play an important role in supporting children to thrive. Research suggests that diet may influence symptom severity and wellbeing in some children with ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and other SEND-related conditions.

Every Child is Different



There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to nutrition for children with SEND. Children may have different food preferences, sensory sensitivities, feeding difficulties, medical conditions affecting eating, varying nutritional needs. Focus on your child's individual needs and celebrate small successes.

Practical Tips for Parents and Carers

Create a Predictable Mealtime Routine, offer meals and snacks at regular times, give advance warnings before meals, keep mealtimes calm and consistent, use visual schedules where helpful. A predictable routine can reduce anxiety and help children feel more comfortable around food.

Understand Sensory Challenges

Many children with SEND may be sensitive to Food textures, Smells, Colours, Temperatures, Mixed foods. Try to Respect food preferences, introduce new foods gradually, offer familiar foods alongside new foods, avoid pressure or force. Remember, food refusal is often linked to sensory difficulties rather than behaviour.

Focus on Progress, Not Perfection

Small steps are important. Celebrate touching a new food, smelling a new food, tasting a new food, accepting a food on their plate. Every step helps build confidence and familiarity.

Building a Balanced Diet

Aim to include Fruits and Vegetables: Offer a variety of colours, textures and preparation methods.

Protein Foods: Include eggs, fish, chicken, lean meat, Beans, Lentils

Dairy Foods or Alternatives: Include Milk, Yoghurt, Cheese, Fortified dairy alternatives

Starchy Foods: Choose wholegrain options where possible Bread, Rice, Pasta, Potatoes, Cereals

Fluids: Encourage water throughout the day. Try to Encourage water and milk as drinks, offer healthier snack options, reduce sugary drinks gradually, focus on adding nutritious foods rather than banning foods completely.

Foods to Limit: Research found that frequent consumption of Fast food, Sugar-sweetened drinks, soft drinks, sweet desserts, highly processed foods was associated with more severe ADHD symptoms.

Be Careful with Restrictive Diets: You may hear about Gluten-free diets, Dairy-free diets, Gluten-free/casein-free diets. Current evidence is mixed and does not support routine use for all children with autism. Restrictive diets should only be followed under professional guidance to avoid nutritional deficiencies.

Watch for Nutritional Deficiencies: Children with restricted diets may be at risk of low levels of Iron, Vitamin D, Calcium, Fibre. Speak to your GP or dietitian if you notice poor growth, weight loss, extreme food restriction, persistent tiredness, frequent illness. Vitamin D supplementation may be particularly important.

Supporting a Positive Relationship with Food: Eat together when possible, be a positive role model, avoid using food as a reward or punishment, make food exploration fun and pressure-free, praise effort rather than how much a child eats. The goal is to help children feel safe, confident and comfortable around food.

When to Seek Additional Support: Consider seeking support if your child eats fewer than 20 foods regularly, avoids entire food groups, has difficulty chewing or swallowing, experiences significant weight loss or poor growth, becomes distressed during mealtimes.

Support may be available from GP, Community Dietitian, Paediatrician, Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist, School SEND Team

Key Message

Nutrition is not a cure for SEND, but it can support health, wellbeing, learning, behaviour and quality of life. Small, realistic changes, consistent support, and a positive approach to mealtimes can make a meaningful difference for children and families.