

# Promoting Positive Food Experiences for Your Selective Eater

## A Sensory Based Approach

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# Feeding Problems and ASD

- One of the signs for developmental disorders is a feeding problem early in life (Emond et. al. (2010))
  - Slow feeding, later introduction to solids, “choosy”
- In one study (Sieverling et. al. (2018)), 60% of autistic children had at least one feeding problem.

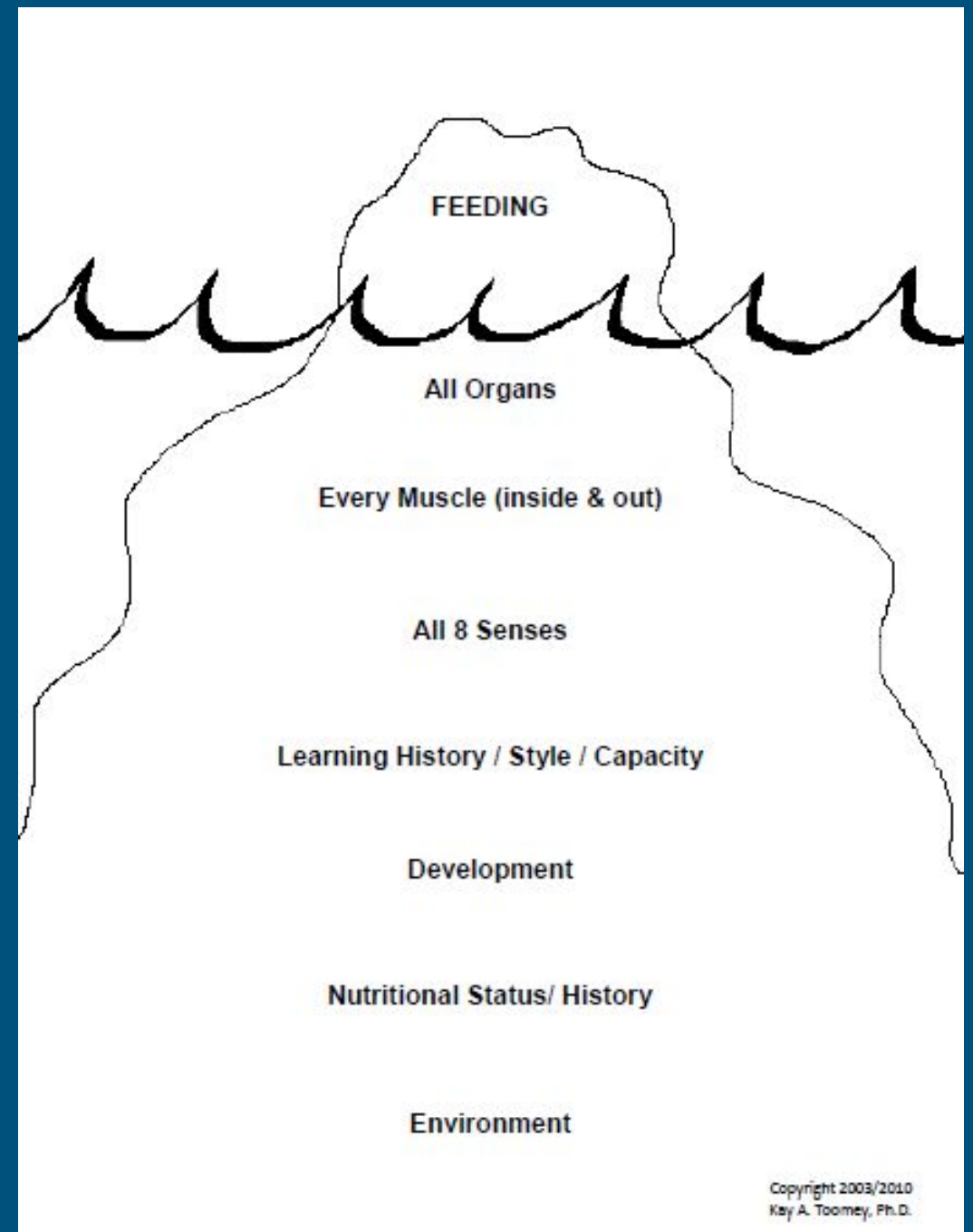


# Parent Interaction

- Feeding problems impact the way a parent interacts with their child during mealtimes
  - If a child who isn't gaining weight refuses to eat during a meal, the parent will likely exhibit stress responses potentially making the meal more stressful overall
- Parent actions **DON'T** cause feeding problems
  - Your child's feeding problem is **NOT** your fault!

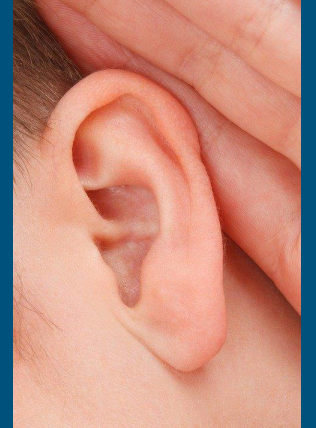


“If I didn’t cause  
the problem, what  
did?”



# Eating is a multi-sensory experience!

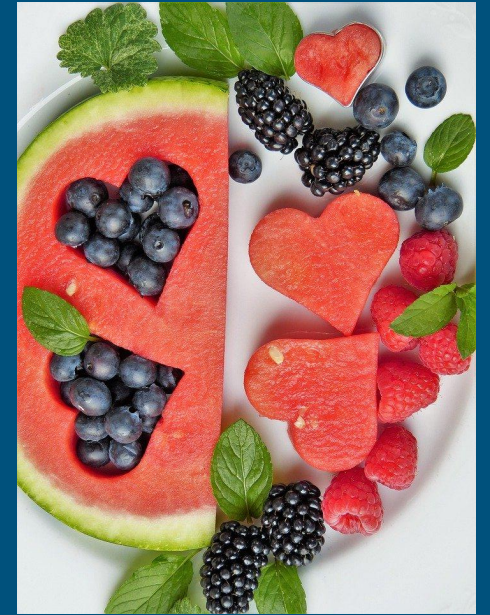
- Children with feeding difficulties are more likely to experience sensory processing difficulties than their peers
- Children can experience feeding related sensory difficulties because they are:
  - Over-responsive (Sensitive and/or avoidant)
  - Under-responsive (Low registration)
  - Cravers (Rare)
  - Experiencing a sensory motor disorder
- Children can experience multiple patterns of sensory processing simultaneously





# Visual

- These children may:
  - Close their eyes or fix gaze away from food
  - Move away from the table
  - Swipe foods off the table
  - Vomit
- How to help:
  - Allow covering food with napkin
  - Present just one piece of food or the food as a whole
  - Use plain, consistent plate and placemat
  - Move food to center of table and out of personal space
  - Present foods in a “fun” shape



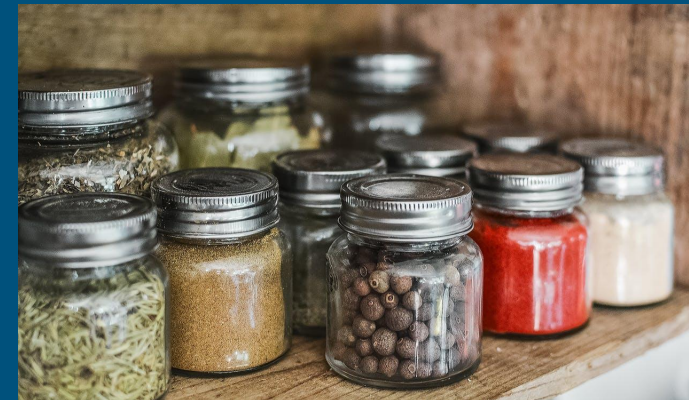
# Sound

- These children may:
  - Cover their ears
  - Startle to noises
  - Avoid loud, crunchy foods or foods that make a unique sound
  - Struggle to eat in loud environments (restaurants, cafeteria, at home when tablet is on)
- How to help:
  - Avoid using electronics at the table
  - Turn off the TV
  - Establish a calm, conversational environment at mealtimes



# Smell

- These children may:
  - Cover their noses
  - Make faces
  - Cough or gag
  - Turn head or move away from food
- How to help:
  - Put the food in a ziploc bag or clear container so they can still see it but the smell is decreased
  - Teach kids to move food away from themselves that are hard to handle (rather than moving themselves away from the food)
  - Smell a preferred food to minimize feeling overwhelmed by new/strong smells





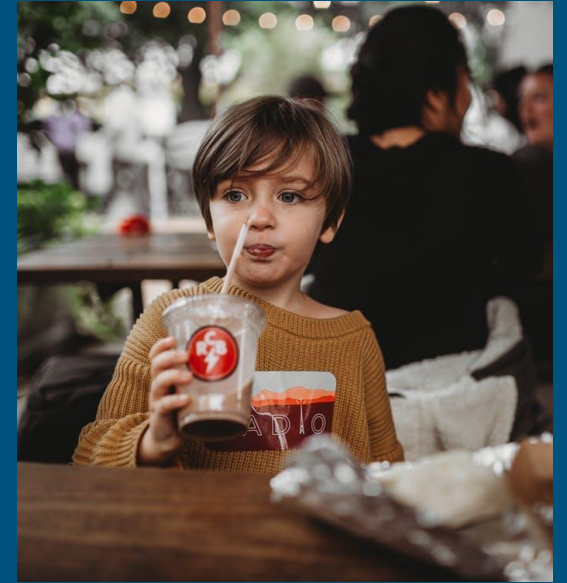
# Touch

- These children may:
  - Wipe their hands often
  - Use utensils meticulously
  - Touch food with least possible surface area
  - Splay fingers or lips
  - Grimace when touching food
  - Scrape teeth on utensil rather than lips
- How to help:
  - Always have a cloth readily available and within child's reach so they can wipe their hands/face if they need to
  - Allow use of a tool for accessing food initially
  - Avoid cleaning child in chair (being washed up includes intense tactile stimulation and may build a negative association surrounding mealtimes)



# Taste

- These children may:
  - Gag
  - Vomit
  - Shudder
  - Grimace
  - If the response is immediate, the aversion is more likely texture related. If delayed, it may be more flavor related.
- How to help:
  - Follow novel tastes with a preferred taste to lessen impact
  - Allow spitting out into a designated container
  - Allow wiping tongue off with washcloth
  - Take a drink to wash the taste away
  - Try to end on a positive note with a preferred food



# Movement

- These children may:
  - Get upset when moved (being picked up and set in chair or when chair is moved up to table)
  - Avoid highly chewy foods or drinking from an open cup (requires more movement)
  - Take a bottle for longer (Positioning is familiar and comfortable)
- How to help:
  - Provide warnings when movement is about to occur
  - Go slow and provide ample support when moving child
  - Have chair mostly adjusted prior to seating the child



# Under-responders

- These children may:
  - Overstuff their mouths
  - Swallow food without chewing
  - Not react to spicy or sour food
  - Lose or pocket food in their mouths
  - Not realize when they are hungry, thirsty, or full
  - Show slow or flat responses when eating
- How to help:
  - Over-exaggerate when modeling eating foods
  - Provide big flavors or highly chewy foods
  - Prepare for mealtimes with oral input activities (i.e. bubbles)





# Sensory Based Motor Disorders

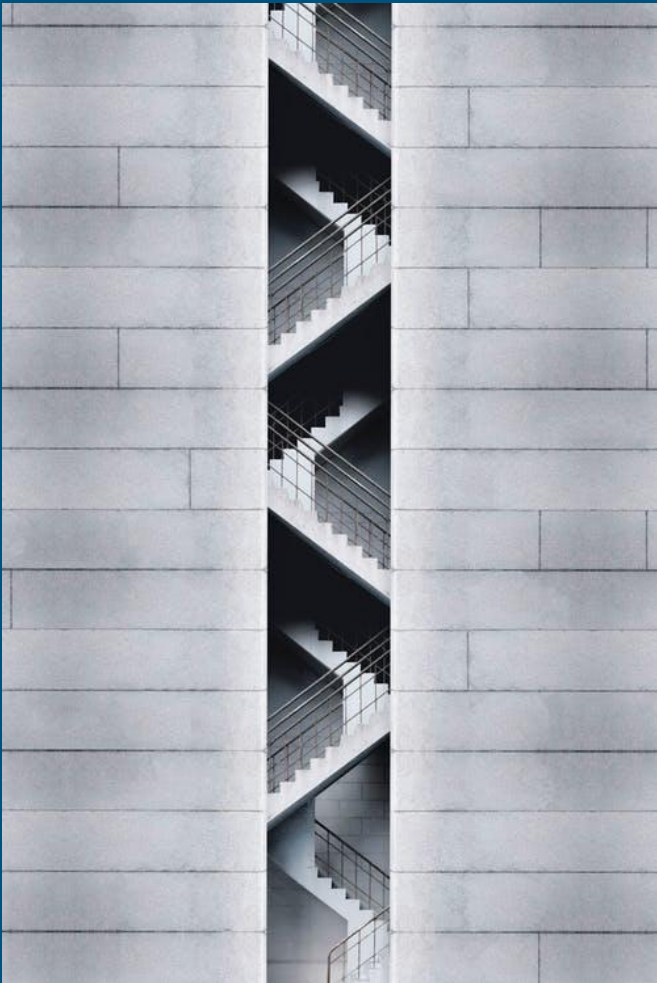
- These children may:
  - Fatigue quickly during mealtimes
  - Constantly move in their chair or prefer walking or standing while eating
  - Prefer to be fed so they can use effort to stabilize themselves
  - Choose easy to eat foods
  - Struggle to imitate others' actions
  - Struggle to use utensils
  - Have a hard time coming up with ideas for how to play/interact with food
  - Prefer foods to be prepared/presented in the exact same way every time
- How to help:
  - Check posture and be sure they are supported
  - Present food with small, manageable changes each time (allowing food to be the same every time leads to food jags, ultimately dropping foods, and not challenging the sensory brain).
  - Use repetition within food play/interaction so children learn how to imitate

# Posture

- Appropriate posture when eating is critical
  - Provides proper breathing support
  - Provides stability and balance
- A child should be seated using the 90-90-90 rule
  - Hips, knees, ankles
  - Tray/table surface should also hit between breast and belly button
- You don't need a new seat for feeding
  - Be creative!



# Steps to Eating



- Following the steps to eating will help children develop multi-sensory tolerance of foods and feeding experiences
- Some children may skip some steps and some may need them broken down further
- The specific foods you use do not matter
- The goal is to move up the steps over time

## STEPS TO EATING

32. chews and swallows whole bolus independently
31. bites & chews, swallows some and spits some

### **EATING**

30. bites piece, chews "x" times & spits out
29. bites piece, holds in mouth for "x" seconds & spits out
28. bites off piece & spits out immediately
27. full tongue lick
26. licks lips or teeth, tongue tip taste

### **TASTE**

25. tip of tongue, top of tongue
24. teeth
23. lips
22. nose, underneath nose
21. chin, cheek
20. top of head
19. shoulder, neck
18. arm, trunk/chest
17. whole hand
16. fingertips, fingerpads
15. one finger tip

### **TOUCH**

14. leans down or picks up to smell
13. odor in child's forward space
12. odor at table
11. odor in room

### **SMELLS**

10. uses another food to interact with the food
9. uses utensils/napkin/tool to manipulate food in own space
8. uses utensils or container to serve self onto own plate/space
7. uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink for others
6. assists in preparation/set up with food

### **INTERACTS WITH**

5. looks at food when directly in child's space
4. being at the table with the food just outside of child's space
3. being at the table with the food ½ way across the table
2. being at the table with the food on the other side of the table
1. being in the same room

### **TOLERATES**



# Family Meals

- Eating a meal together as a family
- Child is exposed to many different foods look and smell, even if they don't eat them
- Parent and siblings serve as eating role models
- Meal can be family style\* or pre-plated as long as children are getting exposed to all foods
- Encourage children to help with preparation and serving to increase exposure to foods
- Make sure there is 1-2 “safe” foods at every meal

\*family style meals are recommended for children who are not yet okay with new foods on their plate



# Family Meals Look Different for Families

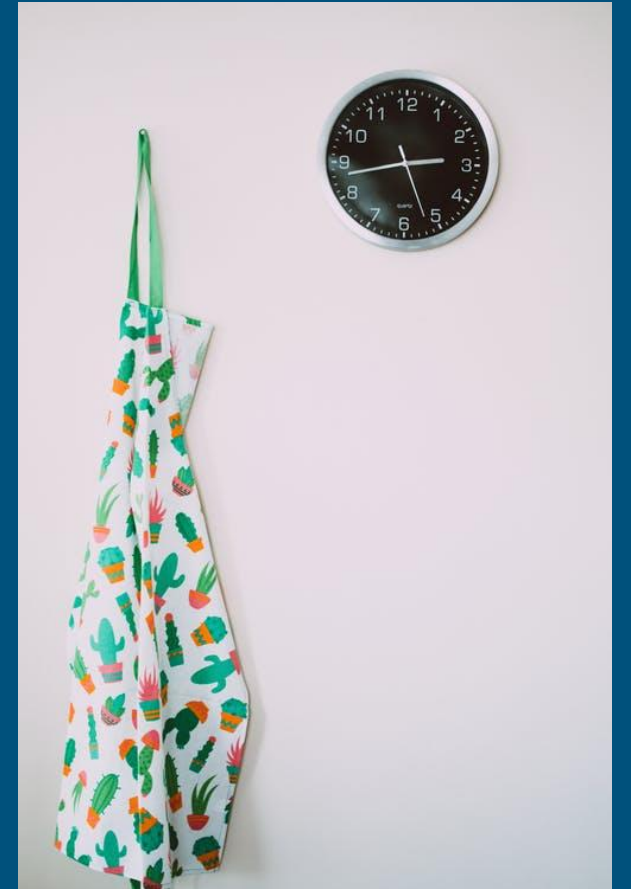


None of them are “wrong”. The important thing is exposure and positive role models.



# Scheduled Meal and Snack Times

- Keep food to meal and snack times.
- 2-3 hours apart
- Time Limit of 20-30 minutes each
- The timing of meals should be consistent from day to day
- This allows the body to become “conditioned” to feel hunger
- High calorie drinks (e.g. milk, juice) should also be limited to meal and snack times



# Meal schedule vs Grazing

## Meal schedule

- Meals and snacks happen 2-3 hours apart with no food in between
- Body learns to feel hungry at mealtimes
- Leads to eating more foods presented meals
- Higher intake of calories from nutritious sources
- Healthy weight gain

## Grazing

- Eating or drinking small amounts frequently during unplanned times in the day
- Eating just enough to no longer feel hungry
- Less motivation to eat during scheduled mealtimes
- Intake of mostly empty calories



# Example Meal Schedule

## Toddler/Preschooler

7am Breakfast

9:30 Morning Snack

12:00 Lunch

2:30 Afternoon Snack

5:00 Dinner

7:00 Bedtime Snack (optional)

## School Age

7am Breakfast

9:30 Morning Snack \*

11:30 Lunch \*

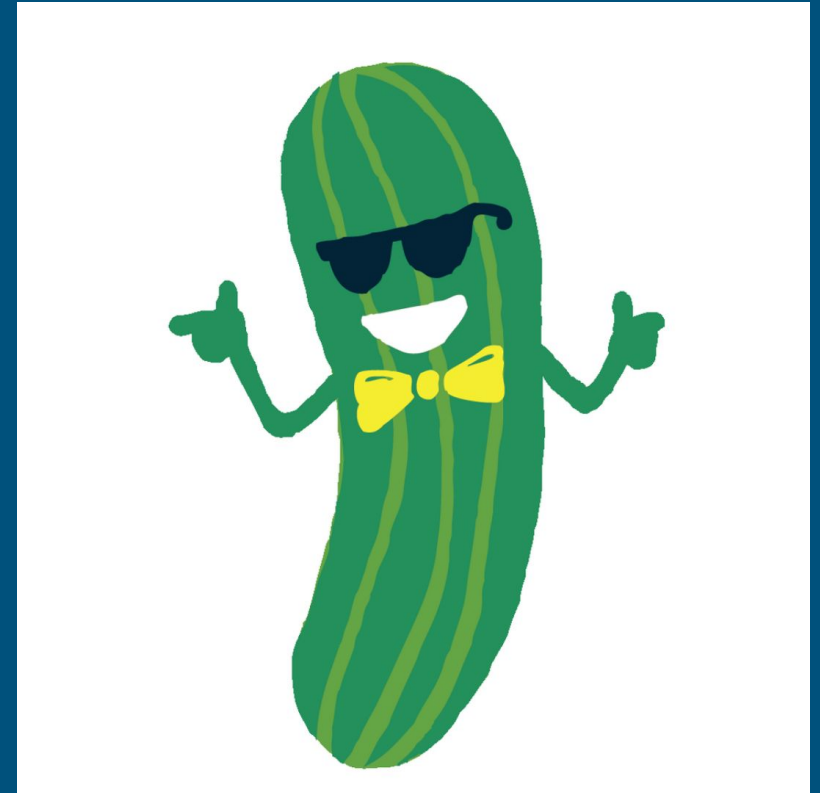
3:00 Afterschool Snack

6:00 Dinner

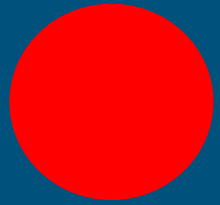
\*Timing of morning snack and lunch as determined by school schedule

# Play It Cool

- Studies show that pressure to eat can increase picky eating
- Praise is often seen as a form of pressure
- When your child is interacting with new foods, talk about one of their favorite interests
- You provide and the child decides
- **Our role is to LET our children learn to eat rather than GET them to eat**



# Pressure Stop Light



Always Perceived as Pressure

- *"You must eat your broccoli"*



Sometimes Perceived as Pressure

- *"Ohh, my broccoli is crunchy. Is your's crunchy?"*



Rarely Perceived as Pressure

- *"I made some broccoli. It looks like little trees. You can eat some if you want."*

# Mealtime Language

- Use empowering statements such as “You can” rather than “Don’t” (i.e. “You can move to the middle of the table” rather than “Don’t throw food on the floor.”)
- Save “no” for dangerous situations
- Avoid labeling foods as “good” or “bad”
- Talk about the sensory properties of foods



# Expose, Expose, Expose



- Children may need to be exposed to a food many times before they are willing to try it, and several more before they begin to “like” the food
- When starting with a new food keep amounts small to keep pressure low
- Encourage “Food Play” using the steps to eating as a way to interact with new foods
- **Don’t give up!**

# No Pressure Veggies

- Before mealtime when kids start to get “hangry”
- Offer 1-2 vegetables (or other less preferred foods) for them to eat before dinner
  - make your child has the chewing skills to manage safely
  - blanch/steam vegetables to make them easier to chew as needed
- Parent focuses on preparing the meal



# Try a “Learning Plate”

- An extra plate on the table where children (or adults) can put foods they are not yet ready to have on their plates
- Children still get exposed to new foods by putting them on the plate
- Spend some time during the meal talking about the foods the on learning plate
  - How do they look?
  - How do they smell?
  - What do they do for our body?



# Rotate Foods to prevent “Food Jagging”

Food Jagging - When a child eats the same food over and over then drops the food entirely

- Try to avoid eating the same food more than once every other day
- For children with more limited diets try to change something about the food each time it is presented.
  - shape - use cookie cutters, put in a different bowl or use a knife to cut shapes
  - color - use food coloring
  - texture - cook for more/less time, add more or less of an ingredient
  - flavor - use koolaid powder or spices to add flavors
  - Allow the child to be the one to make the change.



# Learn that having fun with food is ok!

- The steps to eating include critical developmental steps that families sometimes avoid, but must learn to embrace:
  - Getting messy, touching food, and wearing it is GREAT!
    - This is not the end goal, kids will move past it
  - Spitting food out is important for learning
    - Kids won't get a food DOWN if they don't first feel safe in getting it OUT.

Learning to eat is the first priority,

Manners come later!

# Resources

- Books

- [Raising a Happy Healthy Eater](#) by Nimali Fernando MD MPH & Melanie Potock MA CCC-SLP
- [Adventures in Veggieland](#) by Melanie Potock MA CCC-SLP
- [Anxious Eaters, Anxious Mealtimes](#) by Marsha Dunn Klein

- Social Media

- Feeding Littles - Instagram
  - dietician and pediatric OT/Feeding therapist
- Melanie Potock - Facebook & Instagram
  - SLP/Feeding Therapist

- Websites

- Doctoryum.org
  - Family friendly recipes, cooking classes and more

