



5 Tips & Strategies for a Sensory Friendly Mealtime Routine

If mealtime is a struggle for your child, try these 5 strategies to help!

YOUTUBE FREEBIE

1 CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT

Mealtime is a full blown sensory experience. If the environment is too overstimulating, your child may feel dysregulated which will negatively affect their ability to sit and eat a meal.

Try changing the environment so it's a more calm space for mealtime:

- Change the lights. Artificial lights can have negative effects on the nervous system. Try dimmed lighting, a low red light, or natural light if possible.
- Add music. Use a speaker and play some soft, calm music during mealtime.
- Diffuse essential oils nearby. Don't place the diffuser on the meal table, but have it nearby and diffuse a friendly scent like citrus.
- Declutter. Make sure the meal table is not cluttered, which can cause visual overstimulation. Only have the most necessary items on the table during mealtime.
- Remove distracting screens.

2 SENSORY DIET

A sensory diet is a series of sensory activities that are unique to the child that help them regulate their nervous system. This should include sensory activities that your child craves, plus some calming proprioceptive input.

A sensory diet before a meal should include:

- Heavy work - try animal walks and crawling through tunnels
- Tactile input - try a little bit of messy play with shaving cream or slime
- Oral motor work - try bubble mountain or blowing pom poms across the floor

3 ALLOW MODIFICATIONS AT THE TABLE

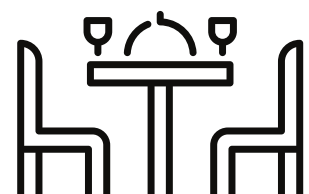
Identify some modifications and strategies that your child might benefit from, and include them during the meal.

If your child is sensitive to auditory input, allow noise cancelling headphones.

If your child struggles to sit still for a meal, allow them to choose a different seating option. Try using a therapy ball seat, a wobble cushion, or even allow them to stand.

Try different types of silverware and dishes.

Use a placemat that has visuals to show where the dishes and utensils go.



4

CLEAR AND CONSISTENT EXPECTATIONS

Identify your expectations during mealtime, create clear boundaries, and stick to them no matter what. Children thrive on consistency, even if it's difficult at first. Also be sure to provide strategies to help your child meet mealtime expectations.

- Use a visual schedule and visual timer to help know when the meal will occur, how long it will last, and what is available to do afterwards.
- Provide your child with control whenever possible - oftentimes the challenges around a meal can be due to your child feeling out of control. Allow them to help with the meal, choose where to sit, using different utensils (like a toothpick instead of a fork!), etc.

5

"NO THANK YOU" BOWL

If your child struggles to eat new foods, don't stop introducing new foods. Consistent exposure to a variety of foods is essential for tolerating and trying new things.

Add a "no thank you" bowl to the table. This can be a small bowl that your child can place food items that they don't want to eat or don't want to leave on their plate.

After taking a bit of a new or non preferred food, your child can place the food into the "no thank you" bowl. This decreases any power struggle and allows your child some independence with food choices.

This can also be helpful if your child throws food on the floor - teach them to use the "no thank you" bowl instead!

BONUS!

1 THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SENSORY DIETS

A blog post with tips and tricks to creating sensory diets!
<https://harkla.co/blogs/special-needs/sensory-diet>

2 5 TIPS FOR PICKY EATERS

A YouTube video with 5 tips for picky eaters!
<https://youtu.be/3Y5HiXXUqgY>

3 10 ORAL MOTOR ACTIVITIES

Add these oral motor activities into the before-mealtime sensory diet!
<https://youtu.be/uEXEbyBX858>

Want more help?!

[CHECK OUT OUR SENSORY DIET DIGITAL COURSE!](#)

- Why Sensory Diets are essential for sensory kiddos
- How to evaluate your child's specific sensory needs
- How to create & customize a Sensory Diet for your child
- Sensory Diet examples, ideas, and templates

<https://harkla.co/products/sensory-diet-course>