**Diet Parents Handout**

Lots of processed foods are beige or white and they tend to be more accepted by picky children. Beige food comes with predictability and comfort.  Bread, Crackers, Chicken Nuggets, Popcorn, Fries, Cereals, Pasta are examples of beige food.

 Some picky eaters might try yellow or orange foods such as cheese, bananas, melon, cheese crips, oranges, Cheetos, carrots. If they only eat white or beige, try introducing some yellow or orange foods gradually.  Take very small steps to introducing new colours with lots of patience.

**Textures**

Some textures and flavours are more tolerated by children because they come with less of a shock to the senses. Something bland is more tolerable than something spicy or tangy. Foods that can be eaten with hands rather than a knife and fork require less effort for the same amount of gain so a child may choose these over a more complex dish.

**What to do?**

Keep a food diary for a week filling in the time, food eaten and anything else that might be important, then look back at it and look for themes in colour and texture. If everything (or most things) on the list is beige or white, then think about introducing some yellow or orange. Do it slowly and without a fuss. If you have some signs of success the next colour to introduce would be pink. Things like strawberry yogurt are a good suggestion for pink foods.

Also look at the times of meals. Are they too early or late for the age of your child? Does the child have to rush from or to an activity at mealtimes? Do you feel stressed at mealtimes as you can give off this ‘vibe’ to children. Are they filling up on water, juice or pop before their meal.

 Look at the setting for meals. Is it at a table or on their laps? Are they choosing beige finger foods because they won’t spill them? Is the TV on and are they distracted by it? If they only eat bland foods and they tend to eat watching tv then beige finger foods are not going to come with any surprises. If you’re watching TV and you put something unexpectedly spicy or sticky in your mouth without looking first it can give you a ‘shock’. People don’t tend to choose a shock when they can help it.  If you eat as a family, is it a calm time or do you find you’re telling the kids off for things they’ve done through the day. Do you use mealtimes as a ‘captive audience’ so use it to air grudges? No one would choose that environment to eat if they had a choice. Is it possible the child associates dinner time with ‘telling off’ so also associates it with food?

 If you cook different things for everyone could you find some ‘common ground’? To start with there could be one tea time meal that you all eat, that consists of the same thing for everyone once a week. Agree with everyone what you’ll be having. Take turns to decide the menu. The child’s choice for their turn can be beige food if that’s what they want and everyone has to eat it. But when it comes to mum’s choice or dad’s choice the child has to eat that as well even if its something they haven’t tried or don’t really like. Be positive about the child’s choice (even if its awful) - you’re including them not making them feel even more different.

 We make choices about food by looking at it first so ‘kerb appeal’ is very important. If there is too much on the plate or the food is ‘contaminated’ by something the child doesn’t like, it makes them less likely to want to eat it. Separating foods on the plate is fine if the child doesn’t like things to touch and putting sauces or gravy in a jug is a good way to let the child feel in control of their choices to some extent.

**Sugary foods**

The science around tastebuds has found that sugar stimulates more taste buds than savoury. That means that the brain gets more signals from eating sugary food than it does from eating savoury. That effect is addictive!  Children might choose sugary foods because their brains are telling them the ‘hit’ is going to be more intense than choosing savoury. Weaning them off sugary foods is usually best done ‘cold turkey’ style. But be aware it will not be fun.

**Avoiding sloppy foods**

 Babies learn to tolerate milk early on, then as they are weaned they learn to ‘feel’ new tastes and textures’ Babies feel everything by putting it in their mouths (including toys) so they learn to trust something by the feeling it brings. When weaning happens, the child usually experiences sloppy or pureed food first then moves on to lumps then finger foods. Lumps can be a huge leap because they involve chewing and tolerating. Until that point all nutrition has been sloppy. Lumps can make the child feel like they are choking so have to be managed slowly.

However, some children have very short ‘sloppy phases’ especially if they have some episodes of ‘choking’ on soft lumps so the tolerance of slightly thicker than milk food doesn’t properly establish itself. Thicker soups, sauces and yogurt haven’t had enough time to become normal before bigger lumps arrive. If the child gets to finger foods without sloppy foods being established, they might decide finger foods are much easier. They don’t need someone to feed them, and they tend to manage to get the food in their mouths much more than they might with a sloppy food. Sloppy foods tend to come with a chance of spatter and having to use some kind of cutlery or waiting for an adult to spoon them into the child’s mouth. To children who are learning to be independent and keen to be like the people around them, feeding themselves can be a sign of being more grown up. Although children move on in their diets and range of tolerated foods, sometimes this aversion to sloppy can remain as a ‘thing’ in their brains. It’s worth noting that children with conditions such as autism can be very picky around foods and textures. If this is something you might have considered, then it might be worth pursuing. There is a section about Autism and picky diets at the bottom of this sheet.

To challenge the gap in sloppy food tolerance, take a step back in their diet. Reduce finger foods and gradually introduce more sloppy foods requiring cutlery. Don’t puree foods but choose grown up options that have a ‘sloppy element’. Beans, spaghetti, soup, yogurt, milkshakes are good choices. Expect some resistance though as the behaviour has taken a long time to establish.

**Keep Going**

It can take up to 20 attempts for a child to decide they will put something new in their mouth. Take your time and don’t give up. Try different ways of presenting the same food, hot, cold, raw, cooked, cut up, whole etc. Don’t pressure the child to try and if they do try something new don’t go overboard with your excitement. Don’t make them eat it all just because they tried a bit. Give it time.

Contact with texture and mess can help the process so try and include play activities with play doh, paint, mud and mess. This helps to normalise these textures. Baking and cooking activities can help this too. Model your own variety of diet to the child. If you only eat certain things, then it’s more likely the child will do the same. Teaching the child about how food grows and choosing foods in the supermarket can help this too.