

Food for Thought: Preparing the Brain to Eat New Foods through “Messy” Play

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Abstract : Many children often experience phases of picky eating, food aversions and/or avoidance. For families with children who have special needs, these experiences are often exacerbated, which can lead to feelings that negatively impact a caregiver’s relationship with their child. Within the scope of speech language pathology practice, knowledge of both emotional and feeding development is key. This paper will explore the significance of “messy play” within typical feeding development, and the challenges that may arise if a child does not have the opportunity to engage in this type of exploratory play. This paper will consider several contributing factors that can result in a “picky eater.” Further, research has shown that individuals with special needs, including autism, possess a neurological makeup that differs from that of a typical individual. Because autism is a disorder of relating and communicating due to differences in the limbic system, an individual with special needs may respond to a typical feeding experience as if it is a traumatic event. As a result, broadening one’s dietary repertoire may seem to be an insurmountable challenge. This paper suggests that introducing new foods through exploratory play can help broaden and strengthen diets, as well as improve the feeding experience, of individuals with autism. The DIRFloortime® methodology stresses the importance of following a child’s lead. Within this developmental model, there is a special focus on a person’s individual differences, including the unique way they process the world around them, as well as the significance of therapy occurring within the context of a strong and motivating relationship. Using this child-centered approach, we can support our children in expanding their diets, while simultaneously building upon their cognitive and creative development through playful and respectful interactions that include exposure to foods that differ in color, texture, and smell. Further, this paper explores the importance of exploration, self-feeding and messy play on brain development, both in the context of typically developing individuals and those with disordered development.

Keywords : development, feeding, floortime, sensory

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