TSD
The Sensory Dietitian

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The Gentle Table

A calmer note for parents navigating restricted eating

THIS MONTH

Pumpkins, play & picky eating

Picky eating or something more · exploring food without eating it · a simple soup to make together · food chaining from safe foods · Halloween without the battle

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The Gentle Table

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A calmer note for parents navigating restricted eating

Hello, and welcome

I'm Iwona, a paediatric dietitian. I've spent over ten years supporting children who find eating hard: children with a small list of "safe" foods, children who gag at new textures, and children for whom mealtimes feel scary rather than fun.

My caseload includes children with an ARFID diagnosis, and I work in joint feeding clinics with speech and language therapists. I've completed the British Dietetic Association's *Advancing Dietetics in ARFID* training, and I'm trained in the SOS Approach to Feeding.

I started this newsletter because so many parents tell me the same thing: *"I feel like I'm doing it all wrong."* You're not. Feeding a selective eater is one of the hardest parts of parenting, and there's a lot of confusing (and guilt-inducing) advice out there.

ONCE A MONTH, I'LL SEND YOU

- One question parents often ask me, answered simply
- Small, low-pressure ideas you can try at home
- A gentle reminder that you're doing better than you think

No judgement, no lectures, and nothing your child has to eat.

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THIS MONTH'S QUESTION

Is it picky eating, or something more?

Picky eating is very common, especially between the ages of 2 and 6. It's a normal stage for many children: growing independence and natural caution around new foods make them wary.

TYPICAL PICKY EATING OFTEN LOOKS LIKE

- eating a smaller range of foods, but still some from most food groups
- refusing new foods at first, but accepting them after many calm exposures
- growing and keeping up energy well
- eating mostly the same meal as the family, with a few adjustments

IT MAY BE WORTH GETTING EXTRA SUPPORT IF YOUR CHILD

- eats a very small number of foods (often fewer than 20)
- drops foods and doesn't replace them
- gags, vomits or becomes very distressed around new foods
- needs a completely separate meal most days
- has concerns about growth or weight, or constipation that keeps coming back
- is struggling at nursery, school, parties or family meals because of food

DIETETIC VIEW

Some of these children have what's called **ARFID** (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder) or a **paediatric feeding disorder**. These aren't about being "naughty" or "fussy". They're often linked to sensory differences, anxiety or a difficult early experience with food.

If this sounds familiar, please speak to your GP or health visitor. You're also welcome to email me at **hello@thesensorydietitian.com**. I read every message.

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EXPLORE, DON'T EAT

Pumpkin: the perfect food to explore

Here's something that surprises many parents: **a child learns about food long before they eat it.** Looking, touching, smelling and even squishing all count as steps towards eating. For a sensory eater, those steps often matter more than the bite itself.

This isn't about getting your child to eat pumpkin one day. It's about helping their senses get used to a new food, calmly and at their own pace. Every look, sniff and squish builds confidence that will help with all foods, not just this one.

Sight
Bright orange, round, a bumpy stem

Touch
Smooth skin, slimy strings, slippery seeds

Smell
Earthy, fresh, a little sweet

Sound
A hollow knock, a spoon scraping

PUMPKIN PLAY IDEAS

Scoop the insides. Offer hands, spoons or tongs, whatever your child feels comfortable with. Tongs are a great "safe distance" option for children who dislike messy hands.

Seed sorting. Wash and dry the seeds, then count them, line them up or sort them into pots.

Pumpkin printing. Cut a small pumpkin in half, dip it in paint and print on paper.

Describe it together. Smooth or bumpy? Heavy or light? Cold or warm? Use describing words rather than "yummy" or "yucky". Describing food builds curiosity without pressure.

ORANGE FOOD HUNT

Can your child find these in the kitchen or at the shops? Spotting them counts. Touching or sniffing them is a bonus.

Carrot

Satsuma

Sweet potato

Butternut squash

Orange pepper

Tip: if your child only wants to watch, that's okay. **Watching is taking part.**

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Simple pumpkin soup

Children who help prepare food are often more relaxed around it, even if they don't taste it. Cooking is a gentle way to spend time near a new food.

Pumpkin or squash

Onion

Carrot

Potato

Stock

Milk or coconut milk

YOU'LL NEED

- about 500g pumpkin or butternut squash, peeled and chopped
- 1 onion
- 1 carrot
- 1 potato (for creaminess)
- low-salt stock (enough to cover)
- a splash of milk, or 200ml coconut milk (half a tin) for a creamier version

METHOD

1. Soften the onion in a little oil, add the vegetables and stock, and simmer for 20–25 minutes until soft.
2. Blend until smooth and stir in the milk or coconut milk.

About coconut milk: it makes the soup creamy, but adds a stronger smell and a sweeter taste. Some sensory eaters enjoy that, and some find it too much. Set aside a plain portion before you stir it in, so there are two versions to explore.

JOBS YOUR CHILD MIGHT ENJOY

Washing the vegetables | Tipping chopped veg into the pan (with you close by) | Pouring in the stock | Pressing the blender button | Smelling the soup as it cooks | Stirring, or choosing the bowls

Tasting is optional. If they'd like to, they could dip a finger, touch a spoon to their lips, or just watch you eat it. All of these are wins.

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Food chaining: small steps from safe foods

Food chaining starts with a food your child already eats and makes **one small change at a time**, so each new step feels familiar. Here are three autumn-friendly chains to try.

Crisps chain

SAFE FOOD

Their favourite plain crisps

›

SMALL CHANGE

A similar crisp in an orange colour or flavour

›

NEW FOOD

Baked sweet potato crisps

Chips chain

SAFE FOOD

Their usual plain chips

›

SMALL CHANGE

Usual chips with 2–3 sweet potato fries on the side

›

NEW FOOD

More sweet potato fries, with the usual chips still there

Pasta chain

SAFE FOOD

Their usual plain pasta

›

SMALL CHANGE

A little butternut sauce in a separate pot to look at or dip

›

NEW FOOD

A tiny bit of sauce stirred through

MAKING FOOD CHAINING WORK

- Change **one thing** at a time: colour, flavour, shape or brand
- Keep a safe food on the plate, every time
- Let your child set the pace. Going back a step is fine.
- Looking, touching and smelling all count as progress

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You're doing better than you think

HALLOWEEN WITHOUT THE BATTLE

Halloween can bring a lot of sweets and a lot of worry. It's okay for sweets to be part of the fun. Making them "forbidden" often makes them more exciting. Try offering a few alongside a meal or snack, calmly and without making a big deal of it.

A SMALL WIN COUNTS

And if this month all you managed was to put a pumpkin on the kitchen table and let your child look at it? That's a step. **Small steps count.**

A QUICK SAFETY NOTE

- Adults do all the carving and cutting.
- Whole pumpkin seeds (and whole nuts) are a choking risk for children under 5.
- If your child has any allergies, check ingredients carefully.

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For you this month: your autumn wind-down

The evenings are getting darker, and after a long day of meals, school runs and bedtimes, it's so easy to keep going until you fall into bed. This month, I'd love you to create one small, cosy ritual that's just for you.

IT DOESN'T NEED TO COST MUCH. TRY ONE OF THESE

- **Light a candle** in a warm, autumnal scent like cinnamon, vanilla or apple, once the children are in bed. Supermarkets have lovely ones for a few pounds. *If your child is sensitive to smells, choose an unscented candle or fairy lights instead. You'll still get that soft, cosy glow.*
- **Make a seasonal drink** and enjoy it while it's still hot: a spiced chai, a hot chocolate, or a mug of apple and cinnamon tea.
- **Set up a cosy corner** with a soft blanket, a cushion and a book or magazine you've chosen for yourself, ready for even ten quiet minutes.
- **Run a warm bath** with some bubbles or bath salts, and leave your phone in another room.
- **Wrap up for a short walk** on a crisp afternoon and notice the colours and the crunch of the leaves.

A GENTLE REMINDER

Think of it as your signal to slow down, even for a few minutes. You give so much at the table every day, and **you deserve a little warmth back.**

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UNTIL NEXT MONTH

Small steps count.

Next month: bonfire night and getting ready for Christmas dinner, without the pressure.

Free guide
Download my free guide at thesensorydietitian.com

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Get in touch
hello@thesensorydietitian.com

If you would value a dietitian's view of your child's nutrition and eating pattern, start with the suitability check for my six-week programme.

CHECK PROGRAMME SUITABILITY

With encouragement, Iwona

This newsletter is general information and isn't a substitute for individual advice. If you're worried about your child's eating, growth or health, please speak to your GP, health visitor or a registered dietitian.

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