

Mealtime Anxiety

What is mealtime anxiety?

Eating is the only activity our children engage in which requires full activation of all their sensory and motor systems. Due to the multisystem demands while eating, children are prone to mealtime anxiety and have the potential to experience a flight, fight, freeze, or flee reaction in response to food. In addition, a mealtime with a picky eater is often a source of stress and anxiety for the caregiver providing the food.

Mealtime anxiety can exhibit itself as food refusals (ie. pushing food away, throwing food, stating negative comments about the food), elopement from the table, preferring brand-specific foods or tone certain presentation a food, and/or a limited diet variety including colors and textures. As these behaviors create disruption for the family meal, it is common for many parents to repeatedly provide the child's preferred and desired food.

Many parents will attempt any of the following to encourage their anxious eater to eat:

- Bribes to take more bites, try a new food, etc.
- Guilt through comparing one child's consumption to another
- Distractions such as electronics at the table while eating
- Praise and positive reinforcement for consumption such as rewarding for a "clean plate club"
- Threats and negative reinforcement for lack of consumption such as taking dessert away, eliminating play time, etc.

While these tactics are common, they often can fuel more anxiety in the child. When an individual experiences stress or anxiety, the human body "shuts off" hunger signals to preserve energy and focus attention to the stressful task at hand. When hunger cues are inactivated, a child will no longer be interested intrinsically to eat to satisfy a bodily need, rather to eat out of compliance.

We're experiencing mealtime stress! How can I help my child?
As always, please consult your feeding therapist for individualized support.

- Talk about the food properties (i.e. color, texture, smell, shape, etc.) to reduce pressure to eat
- Include your child in meal preparation to reduce pressure to eat while offering multiple exposures to the food
- Remember the Division of Responsibility! You are responsible for what, when, and where your child eats. Your child is responsible for how much and whether they eat.
- Offer your child non-food related choices, such as the plate, utensils, and cup they will use at the meal

For more information or to have your child evaluated, please contact McKibben and Monte Pediatric Therapy at info@mckibbenandmonte.com