

Dr. Vera's
CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

stop the food fights!



and make mealtimes peaceful

Sensory-Friendly Eating Without
the Battle for Kids with Autism

DR. FERNANDO VERA, OT

DR. VERA'S CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

Stop the Food Fights

Sensory-Friendly Eating Without the Battle for Kids with Autism

Dr. Fernando Vera, OT

Licensed Occupational Therapist · Empower Health, Houston, TX
StartEmpowering.com

© 2026 Dr. Fernando Vera, Empower Health. All rights reserved. No part of this guide may be copied, shared or resold without written permission.

Important: This guide is for education and support. It does not replace medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or individualized feeding therapy. Every child with autism is different. Talk with your child's doctor about weight loss, poor growth, choking, gagging, vomiting, stomach pain, constipation or a shrinking list of foods, and before starting supplements or special diets. If your child is choking and can't breathe, call 911.

A note on language: this guide uses person-first language, such as "child with autism" and "child on the spectrum."

A LETTER BEFORE YOU BEGIN

You did not cause this.

If you picked up this guide, you probably cook two dinners, pack the same lunch every day and dread meals with family watching.

As an occupational therapist, I want you to hear this first: **eating problems are very common in children with autism, and they are not caused by spoiling or weak parenting.** Eating uses every sense at once: the look, smell, sound, feel and taste of food, plus the feelings inside the body. For a sensitive child, a new food can truly feel unsafe.

That changes what helps. Pressure, bribes, hiding vegetables and waiting for hunger tend to make the list of foods shorter. What works is **calm, regular meals, a safe food on every plate, and tiny steps toward new foods at your child's pace.**

Progress is slow and that's normal. A child who touches a carrot today is closer to eating one than a child who was forced to swallow a bite.

How to use this guide

At the next meal

Find your biggest problem in the contents. Read the “Instead of... Try this” swaps on the left page. Each takes about 30 seconds.

When things are calm

Read the right page: what to say, what to do, what to avoid and how to set up for next time.

Get to know your child

Fill in the eating profile and the food list. They show you where to start and help you see progress.

Share it

The “My Mealtime Plan” page is made to hand to grandparents, sitters and teachers so everyone responds the same way.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Measure progress in months, not meals. One new food every month or two is real, lasting success.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Contents

Part one: At the Table

1	Won't Come to the Table or Stay	10
2	Refusing to Try Anything New	12
3	Gagging at the Sight or Smell of Food	14
4	Only Eats With a Screen	16
5	Grazing All Day, Then Not Eating Meals	18
6	Throwing Food or Pushing the Plate Away	20

Part two: The Short List of Foods

7	Only "Beige" or Crunchy Foods	23
8	Only One Brand or the "Right" Package	25
9	Foods Can't Touch or Be Mixed	27
10	Dropping a Food They Used to Eat	29
11	No Fruits or Vegetables	31
12	No Meat or Protein Foods	33

Part three: Sensory and Body

13	Mushy, Lumpy and Slimy Textures	36
14	Overstuffing or Swallowing Without Chewing	38
15	Never Hungry, or Never Full	40
16	Only Milk or Juice, Won't Drink Water	42
17	Messy Eating and Refusing Utensils	44
18	Constipation and Tummy Pain	46

Part four: Out in the World

19	School Lunch Comes Home Uneaten	49
20	Eating at Restaurants	51
21	Family Meals and Comments From Relatives	53
22	Parties and Other People's Houses	55
23	Sweets, Snacks and Treats	57
24	Vitamins and Medicine	59

Start here

Picky eating, or something more?	5
The steps to eating a new food	6
The B.I.T.E. method	7
My child's eating profile	8

Tools and printables

Your job and your child's job	61
Food bridges	62
My food explorer steps	63
My Mealtime Plan	64
New food tracker	65
When to get more help	66
Taking care of you	67

More

About Dr. Vera	68
----------------	-----------

START HERE

Picky eating, or something more?

All children refuse foods sometimes. These signs help you tell ordinary pickiness from eating that needs more support.

	TYPICAL PICKY EATING	RESTRICTED EATING	NEEDS A TEAM NOW
How many foods	About 30 or more, across most food groups	Fewer than about 20, often one texture, color or brand	The list is shrinking, or whole food groups are gone
New foods	Complains, but can have them on the plate and may try them	Gags, cries or leaves when new food is nearby	Panics, vomits, or refuses to eat at all if things change
Growth and health	Growing well, good energy	Usually growing, but the diet is narrow	Weight loss, poor growth, very tired, pale or often sick
What helps	Routine, repeated calm offering, no pressure	Everything in this guide, plus a feeding therapist if progress stalls	See the doctor first, and ask for a feeding team

Rule out a medical cause

Reflux, constipation, food allergies, tooth pain and trouble chewing or swallowing all make eating hard. Tell the doctor what you see before you start a new plan.

A word about ARFID

Some children have avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. It is a medical condition, not a phase. If eating affects your child's growth or health, ask the doctor about it.

START HERE

The steps to eating a new food

Eating is the last step, not the first. Children learn about a food with their eyes, hands and nose long before it goes in the mouth. Every step counts as progress.

look**STEP 1****1 • See it**

The food is in the room, on the table, then on the plate.

- No demand to eat
- Serve it to others
- Talk about it

touch**STEP 2****2 • Touch it**

With a fork, a finger, a whole hand. Helping to cook counts.

- Stir, pour, wash
- Pass the bowl
- Play with it

smell**STEP 3****3 • Smell and kiss**

Bring it near the face: sniff it, kiss it, touch it to the lips, lick it.

- Tiny piece
- Spitting is okay
- Praise the try

taste**STEP 4****4 • Bite and chew**

A small bite, chewed and swallowed. Then again on other days.

- Pea-sized bites
- A drink nearby
- Offer it again

DR. VERA'S TIP

Many children need to see a food ten to fifteen times, sometimes more, before they taste it. A food that was refused has still been learned about.

START HERE

The B.I.T.E. method

One simple plan behind every page in this guide. When a meal goes badly, come back to these four letters.



Build on safe foods

Put at least one food your child reliably eats on every plate. Then make small changes to foods they already like: a new shape, brand or flavor.



Invite, don't pressure

Your job is to offer. Your child's job is to decide whether to eat and how much. No bribes, tricks, "one more bite" or punishment.



Tiny steps

Look, touch, smell, lick, taste. Offer a very small piece of a new food next to safe foods, again and again, with no comment.



Eat together, on a routine

Meals and snacks at regular times, at the table, with you eating too. Children learn to eat by watching people they trust.

What NOT to do

- ✗ Wait for your child to get hungry enough to give in
- ✗ Hide new foods in safe foods
- ✗ Take away safe foods as a punishment

Remember

A calm table matters more than a clean plate. When meals feel safe, curiosity about food can grow.

PRINTABLE

My child's eating profile

Check how often you see each one. Bring this page to your child's doctor, OT or feeding therapist.

MY CHILD...	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
Eats fewer than 20 different foods	☐	☐	☐
Eats only certain textures, colors or brands	☐	☐	☐
Gags at the sight, smell or feel of some foods	☐	☐	☐
Gets upset when foods touch or look different	☐	☐	☐
Has stopped eating foods they used to accept	☐	☐	☐
Needs a screen or toy to eat	☐	☐	☐
Leaves the table after a minute or two	☐	☐	☐
Stuffs the mouth, or swallows without chewing	☐	☐	☐
Coughs, chokes or gags while eating or drinking	☐	☐	☐
Seems never hungry, or never full	☐	☐	☐
Is often constipated or has tummy pain	☐	☐	☐
Eats very differently at school than at home	☐	☐	☐

The foods my child almost always eats are:

part one

At the Table

Sitting down, staying put and getting through a meal without tears.
How to make the table a calm place to be.

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| 1 | Won't Come to the Table or Stay | 2 | Refusing to Try Anything New |
| 3 | Gagging at the Sight or Smell of Food | 4 | Only Eats With a Screen |
| 5 | Grazing All Day, Then Not Eating Meals | 6 | Throwing Food or Pushing the Plate Away |

1

PART ONE · AT THE TABLE

Won't Come to the Table or Stay

What it looks like

Your child eats on the run, takes a bite and leaves, or melts down when you call them to dinner. Meals happen on the couch or not at all.

What's really going on

Sitting still is hard for a body that needs to move, and the table may be linked with pressure. Smells, noise and people close by all add up.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Sit down right now and don't get up until you're done!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Dinner is in five minutes. First jumps, then table."

Why it works: A warning and movement first make sitting possible.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect a twenty-minute family dinner on day one.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Start with five minutes at the table and add a minute each week.

Why it works: Sitting is a skill that grows with small wins.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Follow your child around the house with a spoon.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Food stays at the table. When they leave, the meal waits there.

Why it works: A clear place for eating teaches where meals happen.

More things to say

“You can come back when your body is ready.”

“Food stays here. It'll wait for you.”

“You sat for the whole timer!”

Do this in the moment

-  Give heavy work before meals: carrying plates, pushing chairs in.
-  Make sure feet rest on something solid, like a stool or a box.
-  Use a visual timer your child can see.
-  Keep meals short: 15 to 20 minutes is plenty.

Avoid

-  Strapping or holding your child in the chair.
-  Long lectures at the table.
-  Making the table the place for arguments.

Set up for next time

-  Serve meals and snacks at about the same times each day.
-  Try a wobble cushion or let your child stand at the table.
-  Give your child a table job: napkins, cups, calling everyone.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't sit for even a few minutes anywhere, ask an OT about seating and movement needs.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Dangling feet make a wiggly child. A footrest is the cheapest mealtime fix there is.

2

PART ONE · AT THE TABLE

Refusing to Try Anything New

What it looks like

A new food on the plate brings “No!”, crying, pushing the plate away or leaving. Your child won't even look at it.

What's really going on

New food is unpredictable: how will it feel, taste, smell? For a child who depends on sameness, “new” reads as “not safe.” Pressure confirms the fear.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~“Just try one bite. You'll like it.”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“You don't have to eat it. It's just visiting your plate.”

Why it works: Taking away the demand lets curiosity come back.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Serve a full portion of the new food.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Offer one tiny piece on a side dish, next to foods they like.

Why it works: Small and separate is far less scary.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Give up after two or three refusals.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Keep offering calmly, many times, with no comment.

Why it works: Seeing a food again and again is how it becomes familiar.

More things to say

“This is a carrot. It's crunchy.”

“You can put it on the ‘no thank you’ plate.”

“You touched it! That's a step.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Always include one safe food so your child can eat something.
- ✓ Eat the new food yourself and say what it's like.
- ✓ Let your child serve themselves from shared bowls.
- ✓ Praise looking, touching and smelling, not just eating.

Avoid

- ✗ Bribes: “Eat this and you'll get dessert.”
- ✗ Tricking or hiding foods.
- ✗ Showing disappointment when they refuse.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Let your child choose a new food at the store and help wash or stir it.
- ✓ Offer new foods when your child is calm and a little hungry.
- ✓ Start with foods close to ones they already eat.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child accepts fewer than about 20 foods or panics around new food, ask the doctor for a feeding therapy referral.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A “learning plate” takes the pressure off. New foods go there, and nobody has to eat from it. Many first tastes happen when no one is looking.

3

PART ONE · AT THE TABLE

Gagging at the Sight or Smell of Food

What it looks like

Your child gags or retches when certain foods come near, when someone else eats them, or even when they see them on TV.

What's really going on

A sensitive gag reflex can be set off by sight, smell or texture alone. It's automatic. Your child isn't faking or being dramatic.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop that. It's just food."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That one is too much right now. I'll move it."

Why it works: Removing the trigger stops the gag and keeps the meal calm.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Put the food right in front of your child.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Start with it across the table, and move it closer over days.

Why it works: Distance lets the body get used to it without setting off the reflex.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Insist your child stays next to a strong smell.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Open a window, cover the dish or seat them farther away.

Why it works: Less smell means less gagging and more time at the table.

More things to say

“You can turn your chair a little.”

“Take a sip of water. Deep breath.”

“It's staying on Daddy's side.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Stay calm and matter-of-fact when your child gags.
- ✓ Serve cold or room-temperature foods, which smell less.
- ✓ Offer a drink or a safe food to reset.
- ✓ Keep meals short if gagging continues.

Avoid

- ✗ Punishing or teasing gagging.
- ✗ Forcing a food that has caused vomiting.
- ✗ Cooking strong-smelling food right before meals.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Play with food away from meals: stamping, sorting, feeding a toy.
- ✓ Practice with pictures and toy food of the trigger foods first.
- ✓ Work on mouth comfort: tooth brushing, blowing bubbles, chewy tools.



GET MORE HELP IF

Tell the doctor if your child gags or vomits often, coughs when eating or drinking, or seems to have trouble swallowing.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Gagging is a reflex, not a refusal. Treat it like a sneeze: notice it, stay calm and adjust what you can.

4

PART ONE · AT THE TABLE

Only Eats With a Screen

What it looks like

Your child eats only while watching a tablet or TV. Turn it off and they stop eating, or they don't seem to notice what goes in.

What's really going on

The screen blocks out the sight, smell and feel of the meal, which makes eating bearable. But it also blocks learning about food and feeling hungry or full.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Take the screen away suddenly at every meal.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Start with one snack a day without it, or the first two minutes of dinner.

Why it works: A small, steady change is easier to keep than a big, sudden one.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Replace the screen with silence and stares.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Swap in music, a story or a simple table game.

Why it works: Your child still gets something pleasant to focus on.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"No tablet until you eat properly!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Tablet rests while we eat. It's back after dinner."

Why it works: A clear rule with a clear ending is easier to accept.

More things to say

“Let's listen to our dinner songs.”

“Tell me about your show while we eat.”

“Two minutes, no screen. Then it's on.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Lower the volume and move the screen farther away each week.
- ✓ Start by serving a favorite food at the no-screen time.
- ✓ Sit and eat with your child.
- ✓ Keep the no-screen time short at first and build up.

Avoid

- ✗ Using the screen to spoon in bites your child doesn't notice.
- ✗ Turning it off as a punishment mid-meal.
- ✗ Adults on phones at the table.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Make a picture rule card: “Screens rest at meals.”
- ✓ Put the tablet on a charger in another room before dinner.
- ✓ Try calm background music as the new mealtime signal.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child eats nothing at all without a screen, keep it for now and ask a feeding therapist for a plan to fade it.

DR. VERA'S TIP

If screens are how your child gets enough food today, don't feel guilty. Fade it slowly. Nutrition first, habits second.

5

PART ONE · AT THE TABLE

Grazing All Day, Then Not Eating Meals

What it looks like

Your child snacks and sips milk or juice from morning to night, then sits at dinner and eats nothing.

What's really going on

Small amounts all day keep hunger from building. Without real hunger, there's no reason to come to the table, and no drive to try anything hard.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Leave snacks and cups out for whenever.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer three meals and two or three snacks at set times, with water in between.

Why it works: Time between eating lets a healthy appetite build.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You've been eating all day. No more!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"The kitchen is closed. Snack is at three o'clock."

Why it works: The schedule is the rule, so it isn't personal.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hand over a snack after a refused dinner.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Wait calmly until the next planned snack or meal.

Why it works: Your child learns that food comes at regular times.

More things to say

“Check the food clock. What's next?”

“Water is always open.”

“Snack is coming soon. Let's play until then.”

Do this in the moment

-  Serve snacks at the table, on a plate, like a small meal.
-  Leave two to three hours between eating times.
-  Put milk and juice with meals, and offer water at other times.
-  Always include a safe food at each meal and snack.

Avoid

-  Eating in the car, stroller or in front of the TV.
-  Large drinks right before meals.
-  Using food to calm or keep your child busy.

Set up for next time

-  Post a picture schedule of meals and snacks.
-  Keep snack foods out of sight between times.
-  Tell everyone who cares for your child the schedule.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is underweight or the doctor is concerned about growth, ask before limiting snacks or drinks.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Hunger is your helper, but only a little of it. The goal is a child who arrives at the table ready to eat, not starving.

6

PART ONE · AT THE TABLE

Throwing Food or Pushing the Plate Away

What it looks like

The plate lands on the floor. Your child sweeps food off the table, screams or hits when a food they don't want is served.

What's really going on

This is communication: "I can't handle this," "I'm done" or "too close." If your child has no easier way to say it, throwing works every time.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"We do NOT throw food! That's naughty!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You're telling me no. You can say 'no thank you' or push it here."

Why it works: A simple way to refuse replaces the need to throw.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Put the full plate back in front of your child.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer a "no thank you" bowl for foods they don't want.

Why it works: Your child gets control without the mess.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~React with a big voice and a big cleanup.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Stay calm, say "Food stays on the table," and end the meal if it continues.

Why it works: A dull response gives throwing less power.

More things to say

“All done? Show me ‘all done.’”

“Put it in the ‘no thank you’ bowl.”

“I hear you. You don't want that one.”

Do this in the moment

-  Teach a sign, picture or word for “all done” and “no thank you.”
-  Serve small amounts, a few pieces at a time.
-  Use a plate that grips the table.
-  Have your child help pick up, calmly, without shame.

Avoid

-  Forcing a rejected food back onto the plate.
-  Laughing or giving a big reaction.
-  Keeping your child at the table long after they're done.

Set up for next time

-  Watch for early signs: turning away, pushing, whining.
-  Keep new foods on a side dish, not the main plate.
-  Praise using words or signs to say no.



GET MORE HELP IF

If mealtimes include hitting, self-injury or long meltdowns most days, ask for help from an OT or behavioral specialist.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Give your child a polite way to say no, and honor it every time. A child who is heard doesn't need to throw.

part two

The Short List of Foods

Beige, crunchy and always the same brand. How to respect the foods that feel safe and slowly build bridges to new ones.

7 Only “Beige” or Crunchy Foods

9 Foods Can’t Touch or Be Mixed

11 No Fruits or Vegetables

8 Only One Brand or the “Right” Package

10 Dropping a Food They Used to Eat

12 No Meat or Protein Foods

7

PART TWO · THE SHORT LIST OF FOODS

Only “Beige” or Crunchy Foods

What it looks like

Crackers, fries, nuggets, dry cereal, toast, plain pasta. Your child's whole diet is one color and one crunch.

What's really going on

Dry, crunchy foods are the same every time. They look, sound and feel predictable. Fresh foods change from bite to bite, which feels risky.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Swap nuggets for broccoli.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Change one small thing: a new shape, brand or flavor of a food they eat.

Why it works: A tiny change stretches flexibility without setting off alarm.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“You can't live on crackers!”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“Here are your crackers. And here's a new kind to look at.”

Why it works: The safe food stays. The new one sits beside it with no demand.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Offer soft, wet foods as the first new food.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Offer new foods that are also crunchy: apple chips, veggie straws, toasted chickpeas.

Why it works: Keeping the texture the same makes a new taste easier.

More things to say

“Same crunch, new shape.”

“You like crunchy. This one is crunchy too.”

“Which one is louder? Let's listen.”

Do this in the moment

-  List every food your child eats, then look for the nearest “cousins.”
-  Serve one safe food and one near-cousin together.
-  Bake or air-fry vegetables until crisp.
-  Describe foods by how they sound and feel, not “healthy.”

Avoid

-  Labeling foods as “good” and “bad.”
-  Removing safe foods to force variety.
-  Big jumps in texture or flavor.

Set up for next time

-  Try freeze-dried fruit as a bridge from crackers to fruit.
-  Offer dips on the side: start with dry, then a tiny dab.
-  Ask the doctor whether a multivitamin makes sense.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child eats fewer than about 20 foods or only one texture, ask the doctor about growth, nutrition and feeding therapy.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Think in bridges, not leaps. From fries to sweet potato fries to roasted sweet potato is three small steps. Fries to salad is a cliff.

8

PART TWO · THE SHORT LIST OF FOODS

Only One Brand or the “Right” Package

What it looks like

It must be that brand of nuggets, in that box. If the package changes or you buy the store brand, your child refuses it or notices on the first bite.

What's really going on

Your child's senses pick up tiny differences in taste, texture and look. The package is proof the food will be exactly what they expect.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Secretly swap brands in the same container.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Be honest: show the new one and offer it beside the usual one.

Why it works: Being tricked teaches your child to distrust all food.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Always serve food straight from the package.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Move foods to plain containers and plates as a habit.

Why it works: Loosening the link to the package makes brand changes easier.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“It's exactly the same. You can't tell the difference.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“This one is a little different. You're right. You can explore it.”

Why it works: Your child can tell. Agreeing builds trust.

More things to say

“Old kind and new kind. Which is bigger?”

“You noticed! Good detective.”

“You don't have to eat the new one.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Serve the preferred brand and a small piece of the other side by side.
- ✓ Change one thing at a time: shape first, then brand.
- ✓ Compare them like scientists: color, size, smell, crunch.
- ✓ Buy the next most similar product, not the cheapest.

Avoid

- ✗ Running out of the safe food with no warning.
- ✗ Mixing brands to hide the change.
- ✗ Getting angry about wasted food.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Keep a backup supply of key foods.
- ✓ Offer the same food from different places now and then.
- ✓ Take photos of safe foods so others can buy the right ones.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child stops eating when a product changes and won't accept anything else, call the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

When a company changes a recipe, it can feel like a loss to your child. Treat it gently, and start the bridge to a new food right away.

9

PART TWO · THE SHORT LIST OF FOODS

Foods Can't Touch or Be Mixed

What it looks like

Sauce touching the pasta, peas rolling into the rice, a sandwich cut the wrong way, and the whole plate is “ruined.”

What's really going on

Mixed foods are unpredictable. Each bite might feel and taste different. Keeping foods apart is how your child keeps eating manageable.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Serve casseroles, stews and mixed plates.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use a divided plate or small bowls and serve foods separately.

Why it works: This costs you nothing and removes a major source of stress.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“It all goes to the same place!”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“You like your foods apart. Here they are.”

Why it works: Respecting the preference keeps your child at the table.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pour sauce over everything.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Put sauces and dips in a tiny cup on the side.

Why it works: Your child controls if and when foods meet.

More things to say

“Sauce is in its own cup.”

“Want to build your own taco?”

“Do you want to dip, or keep it plain?”

Do this in the moment

-  Serve “build your own” meals: tacos, pasta, sandwiches in parts.
-  Ask how your child wants food cut before you cut it.
-  Let foods get closer over time, on your child's terms.
-  Keep the same plate and cup if that helps.

Avoid

-  Recutting or “fixing” food and insisting it's fine.
-  Making fun of the rule.
-  Forcing a mixed bite.

Set up for next time

-  Play with touching foods in play: stack crackers and cheese.
-  Offer a dry dip first, like crushed crackers, then thicker dips.
-  Take apart mixed dishes so your child can see what's in them.



GET MORE HELP IF

If rules about food are growing stricter or causing great distress, mention it to your child's doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A divided plate is not giving in. It's a tool, like glasses. Use it without apology.

10

PART TWO · THE SHORT LIST OF FOODS

Dropping a Food They Used to Eat

What it looks like

Your child ate the same yogurt every day for a year. Suddenly they refuse it, and the list of foods gets shorter.

What's really going on

This is called a food jag. Eating the same food the same way every day leads to burnout. One bad bite, one odd batch, and it's off the list.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Serve the favorite food the same way every day.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Rotate: don't serve the same food two days in a row, and vary it slightly.

Why it works: Small changes keep a food from wearing out.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"But you love this! You ate it yesterday."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Not today? Okay. It will be back another day."

Why it works: No pressure leaves the door open for the food to return.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Stop buying a food once it's refused.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Take a two-week break, then offer it again in a small amount.

Why it works: Dropped foods often come back if there's no battle.

More things to say

“Circle crackers today, square ones tomorrow.”

“You're taking a break from yogurt.”

“It's here if you want it.”

Do this in the moment

-  Change shape, cut, plate or flavor a little each time.
-  Keep a written list of foods your child eats and check it monthly.
-  Offer the dropped food near the plate without comment.
-  Work on adding a new food before another one drops.

Avoid

-  Panic buying ten boxes of the current favorite.
-  Pleading or pressuring.
-  Letting the diet depend on three or four foods.

Set up for next time

-  Plan a simple rotation for breakfast, lunch and snacks.
-  Introduce “cousins” of each safe food.
-  Tell school and relatives about the rotation.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child loses several foods in a short time or drops below about 20 foods, see the doctor soon.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Variety protects the list. The more ways your child sees a food, cut, shaped and served, the longer it stays.

11

PART TWO · THE SHORT LIST OF FOODS

No Fruits or Vegetables

What it looks like

Not one fruit or vegetable passes your child's lips. They pick out the tiniest fleck of green.

What's really going on

Produce is the least predictable food there is: every grape and berry is a little different. Bitter tastes are also stronger for many children.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Hide pureed vegetables in their favorite food.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer fruits and vegetables openly, in tiny pieces, on the learning plate.

Why it works: Hidden foods risk losing the safe food if your child finds out.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Eat your vegetables or no dessert."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"These are peas. They're little and they pop."

Why it works: Describing teaches about the food. Bargaining teaches that vegetables are a chore.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Start with steamed, mushy vegetables.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Start with crunchy and sweet: freeze-dried fruit, apple slices, raw carrot sticks.

Why it works: Crisp and sweet are the easiest first steps.

More things to say

“Can you make it crunch?”

“Let's wash the strawberries together.”

“You licked it! What did it taste like?”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Serve the same fruit or vegetable many days in a row, in a tiny amount.
- ✓ Let your child help shop, wash, peel and stir.
- ✓ Try different forms: raw, roasted crisp, frozen, dried, blended in a smoothie they watch you make.
- ✓ Eat them yourself, happily, in front of your child.

Avoid

- ✗ Praising vegetables as “healthy” over and over.
- ✗ Punishing refusal.
- ✗ Giving up after a few tries.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Grow something simple: herbs, cherry tomatoes, sprouts.
- ✓ Play with produce: stamps, sorting by color, counting.
- ✓ Ask the doctor or a dietitian about vitamins and fiber.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is often constipated, tired or pale, or eats no fruits or vegetables at all, ask the doctor about nutrition.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A smoothie your child helps make is honest. A smoothie with secret spinach is a trick. Let them push the button and see what goes in.

12

PART TWO · THE SHORT LIST OF FOODS

No Meat or Protein Foods

What it looks like

Your child chews meat forever and spits it out, or won't touch it. Eggs, beans and fish are refused too.

What's really going on

Meat takes a lot of chewing and changes texture in the mouth. Children with low jaw strength or sensitive mouths find it tiring and unpleasant.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Serve chewy chunks of steak or chicken breast.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer soft or crisp forms: thin shredded chicken, meatballs, crispy nuggets.

Why it works: Easier textures need less chewing.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You need protein. Eat your chicken."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You don't have to eat it. Do you want to dip it?"

Why it works: A dip adds a familiar taste and a bit of control.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Think only of meat.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Count other protein: yogurt, cheese, milk, nut butter, eggs, beans.

Why it works: Many foods your child already eats may fill the gap.

More things to say

“Tiny piece. Chew, chew, swallow.”

“You can spit it in the napkin if you need to.”

“Crunchy outside, soft inside.”

Do this in the moment

-  Cut meat very small and serve it moist.
-  Offer a sip of water between bites.
-  Bridge from nuggets to homemade nuggets to breaded strips.
-  Let your child spit out food politely into a napkin.

Avoid

-  Big bites.
-  Dry, tough or stringy meats.
-  Making your child sit until the meat is gone.

Set up for next time

-  Build chewing strength with chewy snacks and chew tools.
-  Try smooth sources: yogurt, hummus, a smoothie with nut butter.
-  Ask a dietitian how much protein your child really needs.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child gags, pockets food in the cheeks or tires quickly when chewing, ask for a feeding evaluation.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Most children need less protein than parents fear. A glass of milk, a yogurt and a spoon of peanut butter go a long way.

part three

Sensory and Body

Textures, chewing, hunger signals and tummy troubles. What's happening in your child's mouth and body, and how to help.

13 Mushy, Lumpy and Slimy Textures

15 Never Hungry, or Never Full

17 Messy Eating and Refusing Utensils

14 Overstuffing or Swallowing Without Chewing

16 Only Milk or Juice, Won't Drink Water

18 Constipation and Tummy Pain

13

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Mushy, Lumpy and Slimy Textures

What it looks like

Your child refuses anything soft or wet: mashed potato, banana, yogurt with bits, oatmeal, cooked vegetables. They may shudder or gag.

What's really going on

Soft, wet and mixed textures give the mouth a lot of changing information. A lump in something smooth is a surprise, and surprises feel unsafe.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Insist on the food as it is.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Change the texture: toast it, crisp it, freeze it or blend it smooth.

Why it works: The same food in a different texture may be accepted.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just a banana. It's not slimy."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It feels squishy to you. Want to try the frozen kind?"

Why it works: You accept the feeling and offer a version that may work.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Serve yogurt with fruit pieces.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Start fully smooth, and add texture in tiny steps over weeks.

Why it works: Smooth is predictable. Lumps come later.

More things to say

“Smooth or crunchy? You choose.”

“You can touch it with your fork first.”

“One lick, then a drink.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Offer firm versions: a greener banana, crisp roasted vegetables.
- ✓ Let your child explore wet textures with hands in play first.
- ✓ Give a crunchy food before and after a soft one.
- ✓ Keep napkins and water close by.

Avoid

- ✗ Mixing a hated texture into a safe food.
- ✗ Surprise bites.
- ✗ Calling your child fussy.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Do messy play away from meals: play dough, water beads, finger paint.
- ✓ Wake up the mouth before meals: tooth brushing, chewy tools.
- ✓ Move slowly: smooth, then thick, then soft lumps.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can only eat one texture, or coughs and chokes on mixed textures, ask for a feeding evaluation.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Freeze it. Frozen yogurt drops, frozen peas, frozen banana slices. Cold and firm is a different food to a sensitive mouth.

14

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Overstuffing or Swallowing Without Chewing

What it looks like

Your child crams their mouth full, cheeks bulging, then gags or swallows big pieces whole. Food stays tucked in the cheeks.

What's really going on

A mouth that doesn't feel well needs a lot of food in it to notice anything. Weak chewing skills also make swallowing whole the easier option.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Put the whole portion on the plate.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Serve a few small pieces at a time and refill.

Why it works: Your child can't overstuff what isn't there.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Slow down! You're going to choke!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"One bite. Chew, chew, chew. Swallow. Then the next."

Why it works: A calm rhythm teaches the steps. Shouting adds panic.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Serve only soft foods that need no chewing.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Add crunchy and chewy foods that "wake up" the mouth.

Why it works: Stronger feedback helps your child feel where the food is.

More things to say

“Is your mouth empty? Show me.”

“Small bite, like a mouse.”

“Take a sip, then another bite.”

Do this in the moment

-  Cut food into small pieces and stay close during meals.
-  Cut round foods like grapes and hot dogs lengthwise into small strips.
-  Offer sips of water between bites.
-  Model slow chewing with your mouth and count out loud.

Avoid

-  Eating while walking, running or in the car.
-  Leaving your child alone while eating.
-  Hard, round foods like whole nuts and hard candy for young children.

Set up for next time

-  Use a small fork or spoon to slow the pace.
-  Before meals, try cold water, a vibrating toothbrush or a chewy tool.
-  Learn first aid for choking; ask your clinic about a class.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child coughs or chokes often, or holds food in the cheeks, ask the doctor for a feeding and swallowing evaluation.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Cold, crunchy and sour all “turn up the volume” in the mouth. A few sips of icy water before a meal can help a child feel their food.

15

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Never Hungry, or Never Full

What it looks like

Your child never asks for food and would skip meals all day. Or they eat and eat, ask for food right after a meal and don't seem to feel full.

What's really going on

Hunger and fullness are body signals, and they can be faint or confusing for children with autism. Some medications also change appetite.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You can't be hungry. You just ate."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Snack time is at three. Let's check the clock."

Why it works: A routine answers the question without an argument.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wait for your child to say they're hungry.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer meals and snacks by the clock, every two to three hours.

Why it works: The schedule does the job that the body signal isn't doing.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let your child eat from the bag or box.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Serve a portion on a plate, at the table.

Why it works: Seeing a clear start and end helps the brain notice "enough."

More things to say

“Is your tummy empty, just right or full?”

“The kitchen opens again at snack time.”

“Let's drink some water and wait ten minutes.”

Do this in the moment

-  Use a picture schedule for meals and snacks.
-  Teach body signals with a simple tummy chart.
-  Slow the meal: small portions, pauses, sips of water.
-  Keep food out of sight between eating times.

Avoid

-  Using food as a reward or to calm.
-  Shaming a child who is always asking for food.
-  Skipping meals because your child didn't ask.

Set up for next time

-  Offer filling foods your child accepts: protein, fiber, whole grains.
-  Plan activities for times when your child eats from boredom.
-  Ask the doctor whether medication could be affecting appetite.



GET MORE HELP IF

See the doctor about fast weight gain or loss, constant hunger or thirst, or food seeking that includes hiding or stealing food.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Before you say no to a child asking for food, check two things: are they bored, and are they thirsty?

16

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Only Milk or Juice, Won't Drink Water

What it looks like

Your child drinks milk or juice all day from one special cup and refuses water. They're never hungry at meals.

What's really going on

Sweet, familiar drinks are safe and filling. Water has no taste to “grab onto,” and a cup that looks or feels different can be refused outright.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Switch from juice to plain water overnight.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Water the juice down a little more each week.

Why it works: A slow change in taste is hard to notice.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let your child carry milk around all day.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Serve milk with meals and offer water in between.

Why it works: Less filling up on drinks leaves room for food.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“No more juice. Drink your water.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“Juice is for lunch. Now it's water time. Which cup?”

Why it works: A choice about the cup softens the limit on the drink.

More things to say

“Ice or no ice?”

“Three sips, then back to play.”

“Your water bottle is coming with us.”

Do this in the moment

-  Try water cold, with ice, through a straw or in a fun bottle.
-  Add a slice of fruit or a splash of juice for flavor.
-  Offer drinks at set times, like food.
-  Drink water yourself where your child can see.

Avoid

-  Sugary drinks in bed or between meals.
-  Taking away the only cup your child accepts without a plan.
-  Forcing drinks.

Set up for next time

-  Introduce a second cup that's close to the first one.
-  Offer watery foods: melon, cucumber, ice pops made from diluted juice.
-  Ask the doctor how much milk is right for your child's age.



GET MORE HELP IF

Call the doctor if your child drinks very little, has dark urine or few wet diapers, or is constipated. Too much milk can also cause low iron.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A straw changes everything for some children. It puts the drink at the back of the mouth and makes sipping a sensory treat.

17

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Messy Eating and Refusing Utensils

What it looks like

Your child eats with fingers, spills constantly, or can't stand food on their hands and face and wants to be wiped after every bite.

What's really going on

Using a spoon or fork takes coordination and strength that may be delayed. Others are bothered by mess because touch is so strong for them.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Use your fork! You're not a baby."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Fingers or fork. You choose today."

Why it works: Eating matters more than how the food gets there.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hand over an adult fork and a slippery plate.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Use short, thick-handled utensils and a bowl with a high edge.

Why it works: The right tools make success more likely.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wipe your child's face after every bite.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Keep a napkin in reach and let them wipe when they want.

Why it works: Your child stays comfortable and in control.

More things to say

“Stab it with your fork. Got it!”

“Your napkin is right here.”

“Scoop, lift, eat.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Start with foods that stay on the utensil: thick yogurt, mashed foods, cubes.
- ✓ Put a non-slip mat under the plate.
- ✓ Guide your child's hand from behind if they accept help.
- ✓ Seat your child with feet supported and the table at elbow height.

Avoid

- ✗ Scolding spills.
- ✗ Cleaning up in the middle of the meal.
- ✗ Comparing with other children.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Practice scooping and stabbing in play: play dough, sand, dry beans.
- ✓ Build hand strength with tongs, squeezing and tearing.
- ✓ Ask an OT about adapted utensils.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't use any utensil by school age, or avoids eating because of mess, ask an OT for an evaluation.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Finger food is real food. If your child eats more with their hands, serve meals that are meant to be picked up.

18

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Constipation and Tummy Pain

What it looks like

Your child eats less and less, complains about their tummy, strains or avoids the toilet, and has hard stools or goes days without one.

What's really going on

Constipation is very common in children with a narrow diet. A full, sore belly kills appetite, and then eating less makes constipation worse.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You're just trying to get out of dinner."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Your tummy hurts. Show me where."

Why it works: Pain is a real reason not to eat. Finding it is the first step.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Push more food on a child with a sore, full belly.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Call the doctor and ask about constipation.

Why it works: Treating the cause brings appetite back.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Force high-fiber foods your child hates.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Add fluids and fiber through foods they accept, a little at a time.

Why it works: Small, accepted changes are the ones that last.

More things to say

“Let’s have a drink of water.”

“Sit on the toilet after breakfast. Feet on the stool.”

“Tell me if your tummy feels tight.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Keep a simple record of stools: how often and how hard.
- ✓ Offer water through the day.
- ✓ Have your child sit on the toilet for a few minutes after meals.
- ✓ Add movement: walking, jumping, play outside.

Avoid

- ✗ Giving laxatives or supplements without asking the doctor.
- ✗ Punishing toilet accidents.
- ✗ Assuming a poor appetite is just pickiness.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Try fiber in accepted forms: whole-grain crackers, pears, a cereal they like.
- ✓ Use a footstool so knees are above hips on the toilet.
- ✓ Share your stool record with the doctor.



GET MORE HELP IF

Call the doctor for constipation that lasts more than two weeks, blood in the stool, vomiting, a swollen belly or severe pain.

DR. VERA'S TIP

When a child with autism suddenly eats less, think “belly” before “behavior.” Constipation is one of the most missed causes.

part four

Out in the World

School lunch, restaurants, relatives and birthday cake. How to feed your child away from home, and handle other people's opinions.

19 School Lunch Comes Home Uneaten

21 Family Meals and Comments From Relatives

23 Sweets, Snacks and Treats

20 Eating at Restaurants

22 Parties and Other People's Houses

24 Vitamins and Medicine

19

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

School Lunch Comes Home Uneaten

What it looks like

The lunchbox comes back full. Your child eats nothing all day and comes home starving and falling apart.

What's really going on

The cafeteria is loud, crowded and full of smells, and lunch is rushed. Many children are too overloaded to eat, or can't open their own containers.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pack new or "healthy" foods to try at school.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Pack only safe, familiar foods your child always eats.

Why it works: School is for eating enough. Home is for learning new foods.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Why didn't you eat? I made that for you!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Lunch was hard today. Here's your snack."

Why it works: Food first, questions later. A hungry child can't explain.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Assume the school knows there's a problem.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Ask the teacher about a quieter spot and help opening containers.

Why it works: Small changes at school can make eating possible.

More things to say

“Same lunch as yesterday. It's waiting for you.”

“You ate your crackers at school!”

“Snack is ready in the car.”

Do this in the moment

-  Pack foods that are easy to open and eat with fingers.
-  Use the same lunchbox and containers every day.
-  Give a solid breakfast and a snack right after school.
-  Include a small note or picture your child likes.

Avoid

-  Punishing an uneaten lunch.
-  Changing the lunch every day.
-  Foods that get soggy, smelly or need heating.

Set up for next time

-  Practice opening every container at home.
-  Ask about eating in a classroom or at the end of a table.
-  Ask that feeding goals be added to your child's school plan.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child eats and drinks nothing at school most days, meet with the school team and tell the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A “boring” lunch that gets eaten beats a balanced lunch that comes home. Repeat what works.

20

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Eating at Restaurants

What it looks like

Your child won't sit, refuses everything on the menu, covers their ears or melts down before the food arrives. You've stopped going out.

What's really going on

New smells, noise, waiting and unfamiliar food arrive all together. Even “the same” food looks and tastes different from the one at home.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Hope there's something on the menu your child will eat.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Bring a safe food from home, or feed your child first.

Why it works: With hunger handled, the outing can be about practice, not eating.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Go at 7 p.m. on a Saturday.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Go early, at a quiet time, and ask for a booth or a corner.

Why it works: Less noise and less waiting keep the cup from filling.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Sit still. Everyone is looking at us.”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“Food comes when the timer rings. Let's color.”

Why it works: A visible wait and something to do make sitting possible.

More things to say

“First we order, then we wait, then we eat, then home.”

“You can wear your headphones here.”

“Your crackers are in my bag.”

Do this in the moment

-  Look at the menu and photos of the place before you go.
-  Order right away, and ask for your child's food first.
-  Bring the calming kit and a quiet activity.
-  Leave while it's going well, even if it's early.

Avoid

-  Long meals with several courses.
-  Insisting your child order from the menu.
-  Staying after your child is clearly done.

Set up for next time

-  Practice with a short visit for a drink or a snack only.
-  Return to the same place and the same table.
-  Call ahead and ask about quiet times.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your family can't eat out at all and it's affecting you, ask an OT for a step-by-step outing plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Most restaurants are fine with outside food for a child with special needs. A quick, friendly word to the server is all it takes.

21

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Family Meals and Comments From Relatives

What it looks like

Grandpa says, “In my day you ate what you were given.” An aunt pushes “just one bite.” Your child shuts down, and you feel judged.

What's really going on

Relatives usually mean well, but they see picky eating, not a sensory difference. Pressure from several adults at once is too much for your child.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Sorry, he's just really picky.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“We're working on food with his therapist. Please don't comment on his plate.”

Why it works: A short, confident line ends most comments.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let others serve your child's plate.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Bring safe foods and serve your child yourself.

Why it works: Your child sees familiar food and knows you have it handled.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Just eat a little so Grandma's not upset.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“You can eat what works for you. I'm right here.”

Why it works: Your child's trust in you matters more than anyone's opinion.

More things to say

“He's doing great. Pass the potatoes?”

“This is what works for us right now.”

“You don't have to eat it, sweetheart.”

Do this in the moment

-  Tell the host ahead of time what your child will eat.
-  Seat your child next to you, at the end of the table.
-  Plan a break spot away from the table.
-  Thank relatives who follow your lead.

Avoid

-  Explaining your child's diagnosis in front of them.
-  Arguing about parenting at the table.
-  Giving in to pressure to force a bite.

Set up for next time

-  Send relatives a short message with your three “please do” and “please don't” points.
-  Share the “My Mealtime Plan” page.
-  Bring one dish your child eats to share with everyone.



GET MORE HELP IF

If family conflict about food is ongoing, ask your child's therapist for a short letter explaining the plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

You don't owe anyone a debate. “This is the plan from our therapist” is a complete sentence.

22

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Parties and Other People's Houses

What it looks like

At a birthday party, your child won't touch the pizza or cake and falls apart from hunger. At a friend's house, they won't eat anything.

What's really going on

Food at parties is unfamiliar and comes with noise, excitement and people watching. A hungry child has even less ability to cope.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Count on your child eating the party food.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Feed your child before you go, and bring a safe snack.

Why it works: A full stomach protects the whole outing.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Everyone else is eating cake. Don't you want some?"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"You can have your snack while they have cake."

Why it works: Your child joins the moment in a way that works.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Apologize for your child to the host.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Tell the host simply: "He brings his own food. He's happy."

Why it works: A calm statement sets the tone and avoids fuss.

More things to say

“Your snack box is in my bag.”

“You can sit with your friends and eat your own food.”

“Want to just look at the cake?”

Do this in the moment

-  Pack a small box of safe foods and a drink.
-  Let your child sit at the table without eating.
-  Step away from the table for the singing if noise is a problem.
-  Praise joining in, whatever they ate.

Avoid

-  Forcing a taste to be polite.
-  Letting other adults coax your child.
-  Arriving hungry.

Set up for next time

-  Practice a party at home: candles, singing, plates.
-  Ask the host what will be served and when.
-  Teach the phrase “No thank you, I have my own.”



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child avoids all social events because of food, bring it up with your OT or feeding therapist.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A cupcake your child eats at home is worth more than a slice of cake they're scared of at the party. Bring what works.

23

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Sweets, Snacks and Treats

What it looks like

Your child would live on cookies and chips. They ask for sweets all day, and saying no leads to a meltdown.

What's really going on

Packaged snacks are sweet, crunchy and exactly the same every time. They're the most predictable food there is, so they feel safest.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"No dessert until you eat your dinner."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Dessert is part of dinner tonight. Here's your cookie."

Why it works: A small treat served with the meal stops being a prize to fight for.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Ban sweets completely or keep them as rewards.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Serve treats at planned times, in a set amount.

Why it works: Predictable treats lose their power and cut down on begging.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"That's junk. It's bad for you."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"We have cookies on Saturday. Today's snack is crackers or apple."

Why it works: A neutral answer with a choice avoids a battle about "bad" food.

More things to say

“Check the snack chart.”

“One today. More on Saturday.”

“Crackers or pretzels?”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep treats out of sight, and serve the portion on a plate.
-  Offer two acceptable choices for snack.
-  Give regular meals so your child isn't over-hungry.
-  Stay calm and repeat the plan if your child protests.

Avoid

-  Using sweets to stop a meltdown.
-  Labeling foods “good” and “bad.”
-  Keeping large supplies within reach.

Set up for next time

-  Make a weekly picture schedule that shows treat days.
-  Bridge from packaged snacks to similar, more filling ones.
-  Bake together; a homemade cookie is a new food too.



GET MORE HELP IF

Talk with the doctor or a dietitian if sweets and snack foods make up most of what your child eats.

DR. VERA'S TIP

When treats are neither forbidden nor rewards, they become just food. That's when children stop obsessing over them.

24

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Vitamins and Medicine

What it looks like

Your child spits out medicine, gags on vitamins, clamps their mouth shut and can tell when something is hidden in their juice.

What's really going on

Medicines have strong tastes and odd textures. A child with sharp senses notices right away. Being tricked or held down makes the next time worse.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Hide medicine in a favorite food without asking.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Ask the pharmacist about other forms and flavors, and what it can be mixed with.

Why it works: The right form can solve the problem, and you won't risk a safe food.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just candy."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"This is medicine. It helps your body. Then you get a drink."

Why it works: Honesty keeps trust, and a chaser helps with the taste.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hold your child down and squirt it in.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Let your child hold the syringe or cup and go at their pace.

Why it works: Control lowers fear, and it's safer.

More things to say

“Medicine, then juice. Ready?”

“You hold it. Squirt it in your cheek.”

“All done! That was quick.”

Do this in the moment

-  Chill liquid medicine if the pharmacist says it's okay; cold dulls the taste.
-  Aim a syringe toward the inside of the cheek, not the back of the throat.
-  Give it at the same time and place each day.
-  Follow with a strong-tasting drink or food your child likes.

Avoid

-  Calling medicine candy.
-  Crushing or opening pills without asking a pharmacist.
-  Mixing it into a full cup your child may not finish.

Set up for next time

-  Practice swallowing with tiny candies or sprinkles, with the doctor's okay.
-  Use a picture step chart: medicine, drink, sticker.
-  Store all medicines and vitamins locked up and out of reach.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't take a needed medicine, call the doctor or pharmacist the same day. Don't skip doses without asking.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Pharmacists are an underused resource. Many medicines come as liquids, chewables, dissolving tablets or can be flavored. Always ask.

TOOLS

Your job and your child's job

Feeding goes better when each person does their own job and trusts the other with theirs. Many dietitians call this the division of responsibility, an idea from Ellyn Satter.

You decide WHAT

Which foods are offered, always including at least one safe food.

You decide WHEN

Regular meals and snacks, about every two to three hours.

You decide WHERE

At the table, sitting down, without toys or pressure.

Your child decides WHETHER

Whether to eat any of what is offered, including none.

Your child decides HOW MUCH

How much of each food, in any order.

Everyone gets

A calm table, no comments about the plate and something they can eat.

How to make it work

- ✓ Serve family-style when you can, so your child can choose from shared bowls.
- ✓ Say nothing about what or how much your child eats.
- ✓ End the meal calmly after 15 to 20 minutes.
- ✓ Trust the next meal or snack to come soon.

DR. VERA'S TIP

If your child has growth or medical concerns, your feeding team may adjust these rules. Follow their advice first.

TOOLS

Food bridges

Start with a food your child eats and change one small thing at a time: shape, brand, flavor or texture. Therapists sometimes call this food chaining. Here are some examples.

From chicken nuggets

A different brand, then homemade nuggets, then breaded strips, then plain baked chicken pieces.

From french fries

Wedges, then sweet potato fries, then roasted potato cubes, then roasted carrot sticks.

From plain crackers

A new shape, then a mild flavor, then crackers with a tiny dab of cheese or spread.

From plain pasta

A new shape, then pasta with butter, then a few drops of sauce on the side for dipping.

From apple juice

Watered-down juice, then applesauce pouches, then freeze-dried apple, then thin apple slices.

From vanilla yogurt

A new brand, then a new flavor, then smooth yogurt with a tiny swirl of fruit puree.

Words to use

“Same food, new shape.”

“It's a cousin of your crackers.”

“You're a food explorer.”

DR. VERA'S TIP

Stay on each step until it's boring. If your child refuses a step, make it smaller. No step is too small.

PRINTABLE

My food explorer steps

Hang this where your child can see it. Any step is a win. Your child chooses how far to go with each new food, and can stop at any step.

The food I'm exploring: _____

1 Look at it	2 Touch it	3 Smell it
4 Kiss or lick it	5 Bite it (spitting is okay)	6 Chew and swallow

DR. VERA'S TIP

*Put a sticker on the step your child reached, not only on "swallow."
Celebrate the explorer, not the eater.*

PRINTABLE • SHARE WITH FAMILY, SITTERS AND TEACHERS

My Mealtime Plan

Fill this in and give a copy to anyone who feeds your child. Meals go better when everyone responds the same way.

My name is:

Foods I almost always eat:

Foods I'm learning about (no pressure, please):

How I like my food served (plate, cup, cut, separate):

What helps me sit and eat:

Allergies and foods I must not have:

Please don't:

If I don't eat, please:

PRINTABLE

New food tracker

Write down each time you offer a new food and how far your child got. After a few weeks you'll see progress you would have missed.

DATE	FOOD OFFERED	HOW IT WAS SERVED	STEP REACHED (LOOK, TOUCH, SMELL, LICK, BITE, EAT)	NOTES

Foods my child has added:

IMPORTANT

When to get more help

CALL 911 RIGHT AWAY IF

- ✗ Your child is choking and can't breathe, cough or make sounds
- ✗ Swelling of the lips, face or tongue, or trouble breathing after eating
- ✗ Your child is very drowsy, limp or hard to wake

Call your child's doctor soon if

- ✓ Weight loss, poor growth or clothes getting looser
- ✓ Eating fewer than about 20 foods, or losing foods from the list
- ✓ Frequent gagging, coughing, choking or vomiting at meals
- ✓ Refusing all food or drink for a day, or signs of dehydration: dark urine, dry mouth, no tears
- ✓ Constipation, diarrhea, stomach pain or pain when swallowing
- ✓ Eating non-food items, or before starting any special diet or supplement

Who can help

PROFESSIONAL	HOW THEY HELP
Pediatrician	Checks growth, nutrition and medical causes such as reflux, allergies and constipation
Feeding therapist (OT or speech-language pathologist)	Chewing and swallowing skills, sensory steps to new foods, mealtime routines
Registered dietitian	Makes sure your child gets enough nutrients and advises on vitamins
Psychologist	Anxiety around food and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)

Never restrict food or try a special diet for a child with a short list of foods without medical advice. It can make eating and health worse.

FOR YOU

Taking care of you

Feeding your child is tied to your deepest feelings as a parent. When it's hard three times a day, it wears you down. You are not a bad parent because your child eats six foods. You are a parent doing a hard job with care.

At the table

- ✓ Take one slow breath before you sit down
- ✓ Eat your own meal and enjoy it
- ✓ Say to yourself: "My job is to offer. That's all."

Every day

- ✓ Notice one small step: a touch, a sniff, a calm meal
- ✓ Cook one thing you like
- ✓ Let one meal be easy: the same again is fine

Every week

- ✓ Share cooking and mealtimes with a partner or family
- ✓ Talk to one person who gets it
- ✓ Step away from online comparisons

Find your people

- ✓ Local autism parent groups
- ✓ Your child's feeding or therapy team
- ✓ Online groups with kind moderation

DR. VERA'S TIP

The meal is not a test, and you are not being graded. Some days the win is that everyone sat together and nobody cried.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Fernando Vera, OT

Licensed occupational therapist and owner and clinical director of Empower Health, a clinic in Houston, TX.

Dr. Vera helps families turn hard daily moments into calmer, more connected routines. His approach is practical and respectful: understand what the nervous system needs, lower the load, and give parents words and tools they can use the same day.

He is also the author of Dr. Vera's Dementia Action Manuals, including *Stop the Chaos!*

More Calm & Connected Guides

Stop the Meltdown!

What to say and do when your child with autism is overwhelmed.

Stop the Sensory Overload!

Clothes, noise, haircuts, stores and a home calming kit.

Stop the Bedtime Battles!

A step-by-step bedtime plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Potty Struggles!

An OT's toileting plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Loneliness!

An OT's guide to helping your child with autism build real friendships.

[StartEmpowering.com](https://www.StartEmpowering.com)