

Supporting Autistic and Sensory Kids at Mealtimes

A quick reference for Head Start classrooms | Natalia Stasenکو, RD



easy bites

Georgetown Thrive Center
Innovation Hub Fellow

1 What you're seeing, and what may be underneath

What you see 🧐 (Behavior)

Food refusals, gagging
Meltdowns
Only 4–5 foods accepted
Won't sit at the table

What may be underneath ⚡ (Root Cause)

Sensory processing, oral motor
Anxiety, sensory overload, rigidity
Autism and rigidity, temperament
Relational factors, adult feeding responses

Remember!

Many children have more than one factor at play. Look at the whole picture, not just the moment in front of you.

2 Help kids explore on their own terms (no pressure)



- **Family-style serving**, so kids control what goes on their plate
- **Deconstructed meals**, mixed dishes are often harder for autistic and sensory kids
- **Interactive touches** like dips, condiments, or sprinkles
- **Vary how foods are cut**, like cucumber sticks vs. coins

3 Match substitutes to sensory profile, not just nutrition



Avoid the chicken nugget trap:
a less exciting but sensory-matched option keeps things CACFP-compliant without competing with existing preferences.



4 Change the language for Monday morning



Instead of...

"Just take one bite"

"Good job eating your broccoli!"

"This is so good for you"

"You won't get dessert unless..."

"Everyone else is eating it..."

Try this! ✓

"You don't have to eat it"

"I like eating together with you!"

"Here's what we have today"

"Dessert comes after our meal, for everyone"

"You can decide if you want to taste it"

Build inclusive meals for all kids in your program

Easy Bites gives your program feeding assessments, AI and in-person coaching, on-demand trainings, and 600+ parent resources, **built for Head Start.**



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