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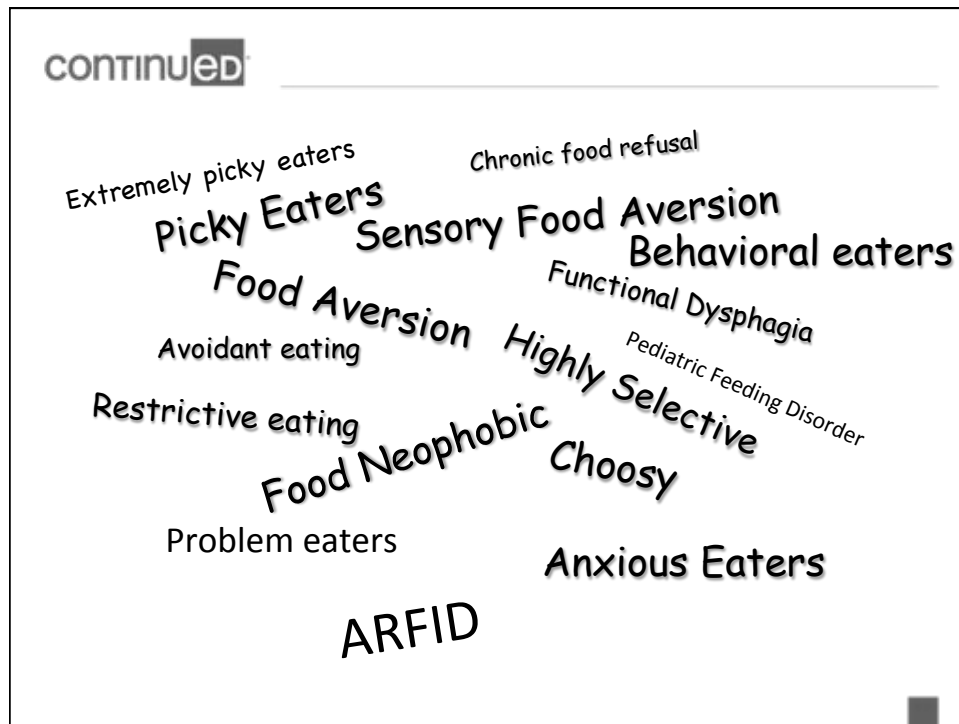
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Anxious Eaters and Anxious Mealtimes

Marsha Dunn Klein OTR/L, MEd, FAOTA

Learning Outcomes

- Identify who are anxious eaters
- Define systematic desensitization as an underlying strategy for the Circles of Sensitivity strategies
- Define rehearsals, new food trying techniques and Re-Define TRY IT as supports for mealtime success.



Continued

Who are anxious eaters?

- For the purposes of this discussion, I will describe them as seriously picky eaters or extremely picky eaters who have very narrow diets and are worried about change in their mealtimes.
- Very specific about the look, sound, smell, texture or taste of their food
- Worry and anxiousness surrounds the meal.
- **Change** for them is HARD.

Some have diagnoses...

- Food neophobia
- Sensory processing disorders
- Autism
- Obsessive compulsive or anxiety disorder
- ARFID (Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)
- What they ALL have is worry

The List (Parentheses Diet)

- Food (.....)
- Food (.....)
- Food (.....)
- Food (.....)
- Food (.....)
- Food (.....)
- Food (.....)

continued

Parents describe...

- “He seems terrified of new foods.....”
- “He seems to hate mealtimes...”
- “I cannot change A THING about the meal or she falls apart...”
- “He is anxious, he is worried, he is so stressed!”

continued

Imagine yourself with worry

- Imagine a giant grown up wanted YOU to try a food that, for some reason worried you immensely.
- Maybe you hated the look
- Maybe the smell made you nauseous
- Maybe the sound of someone crunching it was like fingers on a blackboard
- Maybe the texture made you gag
- Maybe the taste was NOT RIGHT!
- Would you want someone to make YOU eat that food?

continued

Child Challenges

- Poor nutrition, can affect health
- Narrow colors or textures
- Sensitive to sensory variables (smell, look, texture taste and sound)
- Visually hypervigilant
- Highly stressful meals
- Difficulty transitioning to meals
- Suspicious of change
- No mealtime enjoyment or limited motivation

Parent Challenges

- Picky eating, choices not logical
- Poorly balanced diet
- Can't change diet, presentation, brand, environment
- Hard for family to eat together
- Emotional impact
- Doctors not concerned
- Friends and family do not get it!
- Eating out is stressful!

continued

Our support could focus on..

- Behavior...Could we think of the behavior “problem” as the child’s way of communicating to us that there IS a problem? Are we listening?
- Diet...Get new foods in...how?
- Sensory...If too much too fast the child falls apart
- I focus on **fear and worry** about change.....
- I have found answers in the phobia literature.

continued

Systematic De-Sensitization

- A process that uses principles of classical conditioning to replace a person’s **phobia or fear** response with a new response. It creates a hierarchy of situations that elicit a fearful response starting with the most comfortable starting place and working towards the most fearful.

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Systematic Desensitization

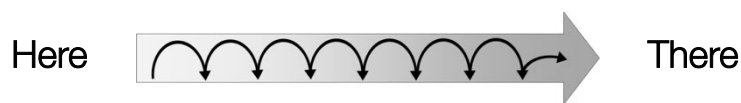
- Start with safe, FAMILIAR food or food presentation
- Tip toe towards change
- Build on each change
- MUST be comfortable at each level before moving on!

Imagine elevator to a TALL building

- Fear of heights
- Straight up to the top? (called Flooding in phobia literature)
- Or one floor at a time, getting comfortable at that floor before going up another floor
- Systematic and careful changes

Continuum, here to there

- Start where child is comfortable
- Tiptoe towards change
- Dilute the worry



Offer vs. Demand

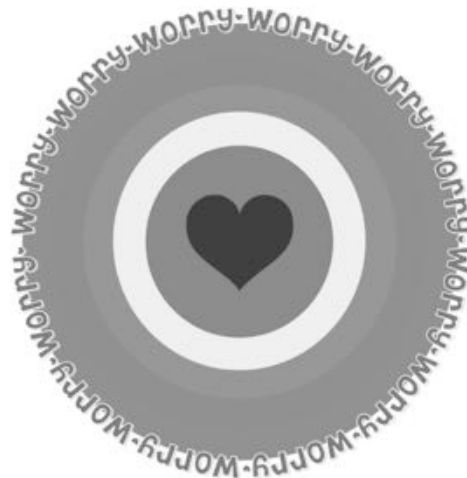
- Supported by responsive feeding literature and research (Black and Aboud, 2011)
- Children consumed significantly more food when not pressured to eat (Galloway, 2006).
- Pressure feeding has little impact on changing picky eating (Lumeng, 2018).
- External rewards may negatively effect the child's intrinsic motivation to eat (DeCosta, 2018).

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Circles of Sensitivity



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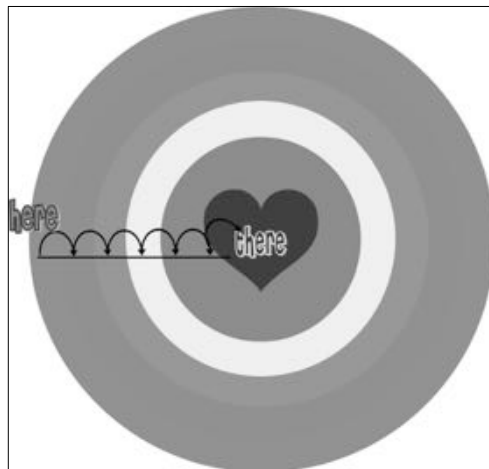


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Let the child know we KNOW this is hard



continued

ANXIOUS EATING

FEEL WELL

MEALTIME PEACE

CHANGE HAPPENS

MULTIPLE FOOD EXPOSURES

FAMILIAR → STRETCH

MEALTIME "TRY IT" STRATEGIES

Improve
Nutrition

New Food
Decision-Making

LIFE
LONG
SKILLS

get permission

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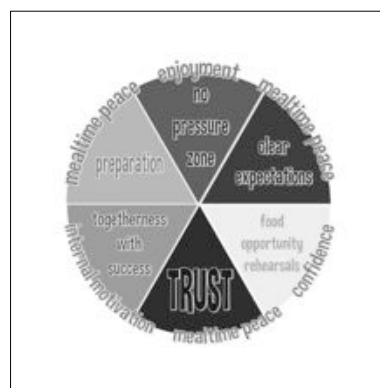
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Pyramid



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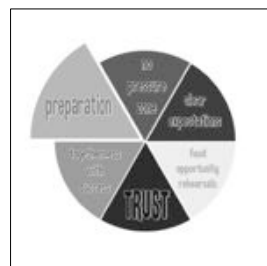
Mealtime Peace, A conversation with parents



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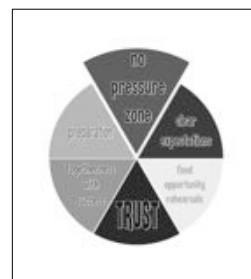
Preparation

- Routine allows for the “privilege of being hungry”
- Meal-snack-meal-snack-meal
- Successful seating
- Successful utensils
- Support in the transition to meals
- Sometimes food interactions need to be taught away from the family meal and brought to the meal when comfortable



No Pressure Zone

- What would it take to create a no pressure zone?
- No tears, anger, or arguments about food
- No ‘YOU MUST TRY IT’
- No force
- At least one food the child enjoys, SOMETHING familiar
- Dilute the worry with appropriate supports
- Praise vs. encouragement
- No judgements
- Re-Define TRY IT



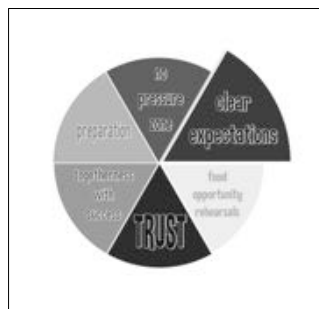
Parents may need to re-think the mealtime

- What would it take for parents to remove pressure?
- Identify pressure and recalibrate interactions
- (Therapists may need to re-think goals)



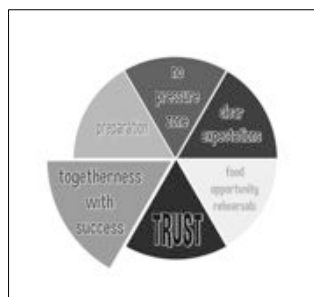
Clear Expectations

- Mealtime has a routine
- Table manners
- Be nice to the Chef - "No Yucky"
- Offers NOT demands
- Eat what you can
- Child ends the meal when full
- Child can leave the table when done
- Kitchen is closed until the next meal
- **No** sensory surprises



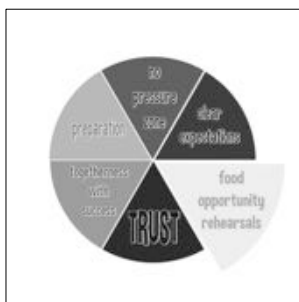
Togetherness with success

- Have conversations
- Conversation starters
- Child feels like a celebrated part of the meal
- “They’re listening”
- Talk about something BESIDES your child’s eating



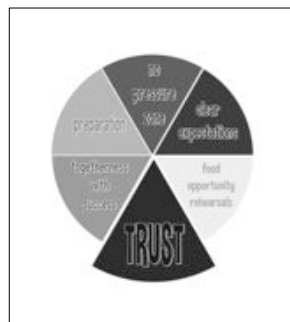
Food Opportunities and Rehearsals

- See others eating
- Mealtime jobs
- Pass foods? Serve others? Plate foods for others? Garnish?
- “Other people eats foods the child does not YET eat”
- Be around or help with food preparation



Trust

- That there will be no pressure
- That they know the expectations
- That they were prepared with the supports they needed to be successful
- That there would be opportunities NOT demands
- That there would be non-judgmental togetherness
- That they can trust their grownups



Change Happens

- This is a strategy in support of anxious eaters. We want to help them be comfortable with *change happens* at mealtimes. This is very important for worried eaters who require every part of the meal to be the *same*. We begin *change happens* at the edges of worry, rather than pushing right into it.



Change around the edge first

- Change edges
- Change someone else's foods nearby
- Child helps change someone else's foods
- Small changes for the child
- (Ask parents, they know! What would happen if...?)

Grade the *ask*

- Safety *ask*
- Developmental ask
- Sensory ask (look, sound, smell, texture and taste)
- Motor ask
- Emotional ask
- Independence ask

Rehearsals

- Experiences that provide children with information, a preview, about what to expect in upcoming food interactions. Rehearsals help reduce the worry.
- Multiple exposures to foods provide rehearsals



Rehearsals

- Children learn from watching others (Brown, 2004).
- They eat more when those around them are eating.
- They try new foods more with more responsive LESS authoritarian presentations/
- They try more when they like the smell or look (Nekitsing, 2018).
- They try more when they have a chance to touch it, explore it. (Coulthard, 2017, Nederkoom, 2018).

Rehearsals

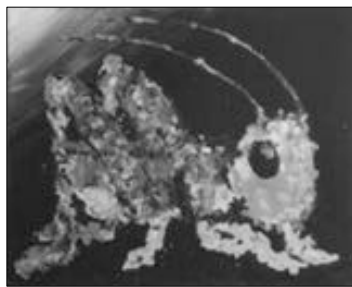
- Distant sensory rehearsals
 - Look- hypervigilance
 - Smell- taste from a distance
 - Sound
 - Touch food with hands
- Up Close sensory rehearsals
 - Closer smelling
 - Closer sound
 - Taste and mouth texture



continued

New Food Trying

- Thing about the Grasshopper Story. Does TRY need to be so BIG?
- www.getpermissionapproach.com



continued

Sandwich TRY

- The Story of Marta
- We need to dilute the ask
- A sandwich try dilutes the ask with a motivated TRY-ER

continued

Finger TRY

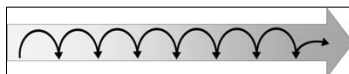
- Help the child rub her finger on a piece of food to explore it as a preview
- Bring finger to lips
- Bring finger to tongue, when ready
- Dry foods then moist foods then wet foods
- And you can try FLAVORS vs. TASTES (that are the flavor **with** the texture)

Re-Define TRY IT

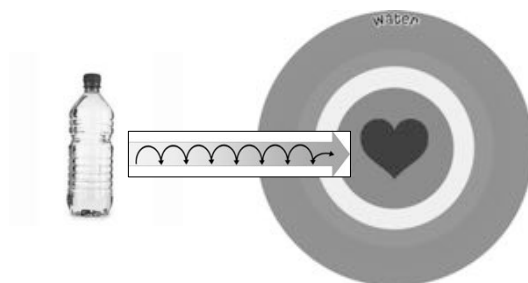


S-T-R-E-T-C-H-E-S

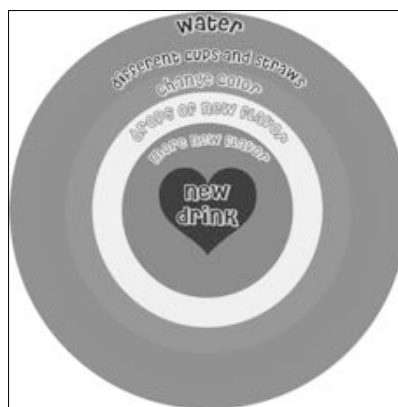
- A s-t-r-e-t-c-h is new food trying technique that helps a child learn to like a new food or food property in tiny steps starting from a familiar food or food property.
- You s-t-r-e-t-c-h from familiar.
- It is a continuum.



Water to Juice Drink Stretch

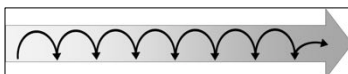


Water Stretch



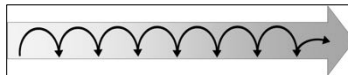
S-t-r-e-t-c-h

- From one kind of pouch to another
- From one flavor smoothie to another
- From one kind of juice to another
- From one crumb to another



Crumbs are a stretch

- We use crumbs to help children be successful in new food textures, flavors and chewing challenges.
- Crumbs can be a bridge to sensory and motor change.
- They can be presented in a continuum.



Crumbs are small

- Grade the crumb ask
 - Visual stretch
 - Size stretch
 - Smell stretch
 - Sound stretch
 - Flavor stretch
 - Texture stretch
 - Food group stretch

continued

Let's have a conversation about bridging to home!

- Parents MUST be successful
- Parents MUST be included
- We need to help new foods be established at home!

continued

Choose food wisely

- Is the food we are working with :
 - A parent choice?
 - A family or culturally appropriate food?
 - Worth it?
 - Banana Story

continued

Anxious Eaters

- Anxious eaters and their families need our help, not our judgement.
- If the child is not succeeding, what could **we** do differently to help them be successful? Did we need to grade the ask differently?
- If the parent is not succeeding, what could **we** do differently to help them be successful? Do we need to support them in a different way?

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Questions?

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