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JUST ONE TASTE!

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Children can be very limited in what they are willing to eat. Narrow diets are common, especially among children with ASD. For some, limited diets can result in insufficient growth or nutrient deficiencies. Diet limitations may affect not only what, but when, where, or how the child eats, and these limitations may have social impacts by restricting the child from going places or engaging in activities.

The good news is that much has been learned over the last four decades about how people, all people, learn to like (or at least tolerate) new foods. We know the key to learning to like something new is exposure, and in the case of food, taste exposure. In 1982, a Penn State researcher found that preschoolers developed preferences for new fruits and cheeses by repeatedly tasting them over time. Since then, hundreds of studies have examined repeated taste exposure in people ranging in age from infancy to adulthood and have included children with ASD. Interventions or plans to increase diet variety have taken many forms, with some developed for the individual and some for groups. These studies have provided some useful information about repeated taste exposure, and I hope this information might be helpful to others who want to expand the diet of their child, student, or client.

Key points regarding repeated taste exposure include:

- If your goal is to have the child develop a taste preference, at some point the child must taste the food. Looking at the food, sniffing the food, or touching the food is not enough, at some point, the food must be tasted.

- Happily, the size of the taste does not seem to matter. The piece of food tasted can be the size of a grain of rice. For some children, making the bites tiny makes tasting easier and less scary.

- The number of bites eaten at as single sitting also does not matter, eating one piece is equal to ten pieces in terms of taste exposure.

- What really matters is the number of taste exposures over time. The number of exposures required depends on the individual but to date there is no evidence that children with ASD require more exposures than anyone else.

- Age is the biggest predictor of how may taste exposures are required. Babies are awesome, often requiring only 1-5 tastes to develop a preference for a new food. Adults require the most, often 20 or more exposures. Children are not as good as babies, but generally better than adults, requiring about 10-15 tastes to develop a preference.

- In a longitudinal study (looking at children over a long period of time) involving repeated taste exposure, we found children need fewer exposures to develop preferences as more foods are added to their diets. Thus, it gets easier, not harder, to form additional new taste preferences.

- Hunger matters, children are more likely to taste new foods if they are hungry. Thus, the timing of tasting is important. For example, offer new foods prior to a meal or snack rather after the child has eaten.

- Habits also matter, tasting gets easier when the tasting becomes a routine part of the day. Neophobia is the term used to describe the avoidance of new or unfamiliar foods. What we know about phobias more generally tells us that as we are exposed to things that are frightening or uncomfortable, they become less frightening and uncomfortable.

- And last, but most importantly, liking comes later. Initial tastes of new food may be met with negative comments, spitting out, or even gagging. It is unknown if this is dislike or unfamiliarity. Only repeated tasting gives us this answer.