

Eating

Many children who are multi-sensory-impaired are reluctant to eat. This can cause both physical problems for the child and an emotional response in carers.

Causes of difficulties

Feeding difficulties may be due to health problems, such as:

- failure to thrive or physical problems with the swallowing mechanism or the digestive system.
- frequent medical interventions, which may have been painful, uncomfortable or frightening. These may present to children as attacks on their head or face.
- tube feeding through gastrostomy or naso-gastric tubes. Prolonged periods of tube feeding may mean that the child has to learn or relearn how to suck and feed.

Problems may also stem from a lack of opportunity to 'play' with food and practise feeding at children's own pace. Adults may always feed the child, because of developmental delay, poor health and/or poor motor control. Spooning food into the child's mouth, or holding the child's hand onto a spoon, may be confusing or frightening if the child cannot understand what is happening.

Approaches that may help

Try to identify the cause of the difficulties. This may help in deciding what to do. It will also help the adult respond calmly if s/he understands the child's behaviour.

- [Read the key approaches for deafblind children](#) - building trust, being consistent, helping understanding, taking time, following the child and being supportive.
- Make sure the child and adult are positioned comfortably.
- Cue the child in to what is about to happen. Use an object cue for mealtimes, such as a bib or spoon. Give the child time to smell and feel the food. Use a consistent signal to show that the next mouthful is coming.
- Encourage children to touch food - they may then take their hands to their mouth. Messy play using soft, sweet foods (e.g instant whip, golden syrup) may encourage children to smell, touch and taste food.
- Work with children learning to feed themselves - for example, the adult and child load the spoon, and the child puts it in his or her mouth. Don't introduce this stage until the child is ready. Give control to the child - don't force his or her hands through the activity.
- Praise positive responses and accept the child not wanting to eat or do something. Try to stay relaxed.

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