The Role of Food in Sensory Regulation:

Josh Olivas



AMUSE BOUCHE



Ignore Trends, Stick to Basics

Autism is too complex to have a single mechanism or cure-all

Ignore the TikTok trends, the "influencers", the mommy blogs - stick to the basics of nutrition A person who feels good is better equipped to handle whatever their brain might throw at them

Sensory & Palate Profile Data



A wide variety of individual ingredients ("YES foods")

The issue instead arises from combos of those YES foods

The Overwhelm Battery Meter!

TOP OF THE MORNING **OH SHOOT I'M LATE! HAD TO SLAM BRAKES GOOD MORNING COWORKER!** THESE LIGHTS ARE SO BRIGHT A DOOR SLAMS AT LEAST IT'S TIME TO GO HOME...

The Overwhelm Battery Meter!

Things stick with us the rest of the day because it takes a lot of extra downtime to recognize the emotion, process it, then let it go



It makes every day a desperate attempt to limit what is coming in so that we can continue functioning



APPETIZER



Food is Hard for Us All

Emotions tangle into a ball of christmas lights that take hours or days to untangle

You just want to be normal, eat food like everyone else

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- awareness might be limited
- but more often we're aware
- eating is one of the very few tasks where if we don't do it, we die

DON'T FIGHT AUTISM WITH FORCE

FIGHT IT WITH LOGIC



FIRST MAIN COURSE



Controlling Sensory Input

Nails on a chalkboard or cutlery on a plate - does powering through make it easier?

Crunchy, slimy, chewy, spicy, creamy, sour, burnt, stringy, unexpected, or a combination of multiple

There are no sunglasses or noise-cancelling headphones for your mouth

Food for Stimming

Snack time could be a great time to regulate or distract



What is stimming?
Is it unique to
autism?

- bubbles on your tongue from soda
- tingling from spicy foods
- crunches like bubble wrap for your mouth
- popping boba explosions
- slurpiness of noodles

You Like What You Grow Up With

- introduce a wide variety as early as possible
 - be excited! "wow this is new, it's an adventure!
- limited palate ON TOP OF limited options as a kid?!
 - that's now 2 decades of habits to break sure it's possible... IF they're interested
 - but unless they have a special interest in food, why would they be?! a TON of buy-in to change decades

You Like What You Grow Up With

- encourage and practice verbalizing opinions why did you spit that out? why did you make that face?
 - if the answer has to do with flavor great! you can work with that, continue encouraging adventure
 - it makes my teeth feel wobbly, it's like stepping on legos, it caused thunder inside my head
 - I'm not afraid of Butterfingers, it just feels like stepping on mud and packing it into my teeth

Rigidity in food can stem from the need to retain that last little bit of control over our lives in a world where we feel overwhelmed

through sensory input, familiar and predictable flavors, or reactions that happen inside our bodies



Mealtime should be a moment of reprieve and safety



SUPPLEMENTAL CAVIAR



A Quick Aside on Shutdowns

THEY HURT

- 10% brain capacity
- eyes can't focus
- everything is ticker tape that's moving too fast on screen
- your mouth is moving but I hear nothing
- senses are through the roof in sensitivity

A Quick Aside on Shutdowns

I have to break down tasks, chores and responsibilities into three categories:

RED - I'm terrified

YELLOW - I'm cautious

GREEN - recharge

- digital photo vs. roll of film
- like after cramming for a test
- not absorbing any information
- it's not emotional, it's physical

I am desperate to avoid them



SECOND MAIN COURSE



Expanding Palates

Our goal is to help someone discover foods they enjoy

Expanding Palates Tip #1/9

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Accept that this person has a limited palate!

(aka they're picky)

That's fine! We vilify pickiness and pretend that culinary adventurousness is virtuous, but that's not true at all!

Discovering what they do like becomes that much more important

Expanding Palates Tip #2 / 9

What counts as hurting?

- allergies
- dietary restrictions
- given it tons of chances
- sensory sensitivities

If it doesn't hurt you, try it!

remind them they can spit it out!

Expanding Palates Tip #3 / 9

The risk of missing out on something fun can oftentimes overcome the risk of it not tasting good

What if it's your next favorite food?



Expanding Palates Tip #4 / 9

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Have a fall-back meal at the ready

- It's so much easier to be brave when you know you're protected
- Maybe a frozen meal or ramen
- Maybe secretly their favorite meal
- Allow for samples

Expanding Palates Tip #5 / 9

Try customizing the basics

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- ramen, boxed mac & cheese, rice packets, etc.
- customize with pre-cooked frozen meats or vegetables, canned meats or vegetables, or seasonings based on where the dish originated

Expanding Palates Tip #6 / 9

hate the texture of something? BLEND IT! carrots, nuts, ham, broccoli, smoothies, a donut



strong sauces or other flavors can help mask (think fruits, soy sauce, sugar, umami)

cut everything the same size - this tricks your brain into thinking it's chewing something more palatable

Expanding Palates Tip #7 / 9

Separate ingredients & seasonings!

let us mix things together ourselves, IF we want to



tiers of seasoning:

tier 1: just salt! tier

2: garlic+onion tier

3: wherever the

dish originates

this one hurts - add all seasonings at the end so you can taste & adjust

barter if needed - you can add extra bacon if you add four carrot slices

Expanding Palates Tip #8 / 9

Get them involved in the process!!!!

the end goal isn't fancy awards, it's basic principles

eliminate: extra cooking steps

combine: all flavor parts into 1 step, cook things all in 1 pan

reduce prep: frozen, powders, etc

Not perfect food...
Attainable food

Expanding Palates Tip #9 / 9

Break up with the recipe...

o your recipe is probably trash...

Recipes don't know

it doesn't know your stove is Soviet-era, or you LOVE garlic

you might be thinking: my nonna didn't emigrate here from Italy to be told she was wrong about meatballs!!

don't worry: if they ask hard questions, that signals a career



PRE-DESSERT



When Not to Push

- lots of red tasks
 - battery is low

- could cause a bad experience

- busy growing in other ways

Don't fight autism with force, fight it with logic

I said se! Just how it is!

PROBLEM: I am hungry DATA: After eating pizza, I'm not hungry PROBLEM: solved!

- fight w/ expanded logic (nutrition, savings)

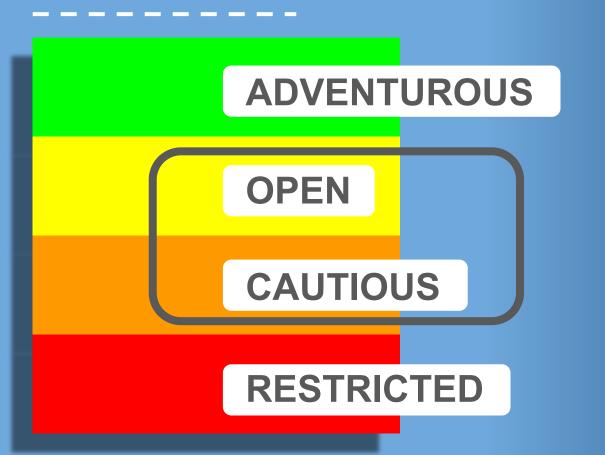
When Not to Push

- don't keep biting cold things
 - not exposure therapy because this isn't fear
- here's the hill you could die on:

Don't fight autism with force, fight it with logic

- sensory integration therapy, OTs, CBT for emotion... OR just don't eat squishy things! separate textures! dozens of foods & vitamins exist -why *force* cruciferous vegetables?

It's Not as Extreme as it Seems!



A wide variety of individual ingredients ("YES foods")

The issue instead arises from combos of those YES foods



PETITS FOURS

To Fight with Logic... Learn!

Trustworthy info will help you prepare to answer "why?", and it will combat the shame we accidentally instill with comments like "you're so unhealthy!" and "you're eating all wrong..." We might seem impervious & oblivious, but we feel shame too

- macronutrients, micronutrients, & nutrient balance
- effects of major nutrients on the body
- basics of how sleep works and how food can help
- basic cooking principles

You've got homework



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Trustworthy Resources

Nutrition

- -Dietary Guidelines for Americans USDA DietaryGuidelines.gov
- -Nutrition Education Resources & Materials FDA.gov

Cooking

YouTube Channels

-J Kenji Lopez-Alt -Basics with Babish

Websites

-Pinch of Yum -Simply Recipes

-The Pioneer Woman -Good Eats

Books

-The Food Lab -Salt Fat Acid Heat

-You Suck at Cooking

Local Cooking Classes

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ScenicView Clinic

(801) 226-2550 Clinic@SVAcademy.org

Admissions

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