

# DOS & DON'TS WITH FOOD PLAY

## EDUCATIONAL HANDOUT

Food play, sometimes called food exploration, is a feeding therapy approach therapists use to help children with feeding difficulties. The technique involves creating a fun, safe, and non-stressful environment for the child to try new foods and textures. The child is given opportunities to touch, smell, and taste different foods playfully and interactively. Food play aims to reduce anxiety around food, increase the child's food acceptance, and help them develop healthy eating habits. Food play activities may include sensory play with food, food art, cooking, and food games. By engaging in these activities, the child can develop a positive relationship with food and learn to enjoy a variety of healthy foods.

### DOS



- **Do** model for the child as it will encourage your child to interact with the food.
- **Do** use neutral words that describe the food when modeling food interactions.
- **Do** motivate your child to progress up the eating hierarchy.
- **Do** allow your child to play with their food in a way that makes them comfortable.
- **Do** repeat foods or activities during food play. It may take up to 30 exposures to a new food or activity during mealtime play before a child decides if they like it or not.
- **Do** introduce food play before a meal or during snack time when they are a little hungry.
- **Do** introduce food play in the kitchen or dining area.

### DON'TS



- **Don't** force your child to interact (touch, taste, eat) with the food.
- **Don't** try to feed or force feed the food to your child.
- **Don't** use phrases that would put pressure on the child, like "Just take a bite!" or "Do it for mom!"
- **Don't** hide or mix food secretly into the child's already accepted food item.
- **Don't** use negative words (examples: yucky, icky, gross) to describe foods as it may influence the child's perception and experience with the food.
- **Don't** introduce food play during meals as the child may feel pressure and it may create a negative meal experience.

#### References:

- Morris, S. E., Klein, M. D., & Satter, E. (2000). *Pre-feeding skills: A comprehensive resource for mealtime development* (2nd ed.). Austin: Pro-Ed.
- Tanner, A., & Andreone, B. E. (2015). Using graduated exposure and differential reinforcement to increase food repertoire in a child with autism. *Behavioral Analysis Practice*, 8(2), 233-240. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-015-0077-9>
- Toomey, K., & Ross, E. (2011). SOS approach to feeding. *Perspectives on Swallowing and Swallowing Disorders (Dysphagia)*, 20(3), 82. <https://doi.org/10.1044/sasd20.3.82>