

# Sensory Snack Time

## Introduction

Laura Osman, Ciara Paramore, Dr. James Galpin

## The Bridge London





## Sensory Snack Time

### Introduction

Feeding or eating difficulties are frequently identified as problematic for autistic children. Across the existing literature three categories of feeding problems in children with autism are highlighted: food selectivity, food refusal and disruptive mealtime behaviours. Of these, food selectivity is identified as being the most common problem. Research has sought to explore why there is such a high level of food selectivity in autistic compared to both neurotypical children and children with other developmental differences. There is an increasing amount of evidence to support the causal relationship between sensory differences and food selectivity in children with autism.

The current project looked at taking a sensory based approach to supporting pupils to increase the range of foods they felt comfortable eating. There is some existing research supporting the use of behavioural based interventions to address food selectivity, these can often fail to take into account sensory challenges pupils can face in eating. The sensory experience of certain foods may well be a negative one for many of our pupils and as such food selectivity, refusal of new foods and behaviours that challenge around the acceptance of new foods, is recognised at The Bridge as an adaptive and communicative response to a physiologically motivated difficulty. The sensory based approach of this project will focus on encouraging tactile and oral exploration, looking to normalize sensation, as the first step to addressing food selectivity. Importantly the sensory snack sessions in class will be fun!

Staff will receive some initial training from the school dietician and speech and language therapist to help understand the physiological process of eating and the role of the sensory system. Food hierarchies, based on the sensory qualities of foods will also be discussed, with examples given. The sensory snack sessions will take the place of the usual class snack time across four participating classes. These will involve sensory games and opportunities to explore different food textures, smells and tastes. The extent to which pupils engage with these new foods will be determined by the pupils themselves, however, each session will consistently provide them with the opportunity to engage with these foods to varying degrees (from feeling the food in a clear bag to tasting a small piece for example).

Prior to the start of the sessions class teachers will complete the Brief Autism Mealtime Behaviour Inventory (BAMBI) for each pupil. This standardised measure will provide a baseline score for our pupils. Staff will also, following the first session when the full range of foods is introduced to pupils, complete a food inventory for each pupil detail which foods they would choose to eat. The sessions are due to run for twelve weeks, after which staff will once again complete the BAMBI and the Food Inventory to allow us to examine the potential impact of the sensory snack sessions on increasing the range of foods our pupils are comfortable eating at snack time.