

EQUIPPED FOR THE JOURNEY

Food Insecurities



the
RESTORE NETWORK
changing the culture of foster care

Friends,

Food is essential to our survival. It's comforting. It's a social activity. It's fuel for our brains and bodies. Food is an important part of our daily lives.

However, for some of our children, food was scarce. Food was something you got if you were "good." Food was something you had to steal. Food was withheld. Food was something you had to hide away for fear that it would be taken from you. There were no routines. There were no family meals. They were no table manners. Some of our littlest ones weren't fed on demand as newborns but had to wait for unpredictable patterns of care.

Many of our children did not experience food within the context of a loving, nurturing, predictable family. And because of this, they have developed beliefs and behaviors around food that are less than ideal.

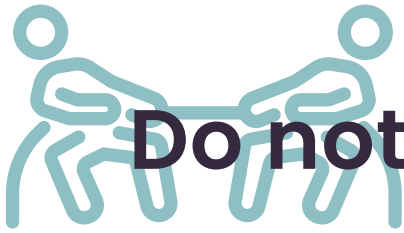
Hoarding. Stealing. Lying. Eating non-edible items (see information online about pica). Overeating to the point of getting sick. Obsessions and compulsions around the idea of food. Being extremely picky.

If this is part of your child's story, then family routines and rituals around food might have become stressful for you. Control battles around food might be raging in your home, or your relationship with your child might be stressed due to sneaky behaviors.

Here's some good news: By providing regular healthy access to food, sharing control with your child in safe ways, and creating overall felt-safety in your home, these food insecurities can diminish for your child. Start by observing your child and how they interact with food and mealtimes. Keep a journal about what you observe and look for trends and patterns. Children are predictable and you'll likely begin to recognize triggers and realize areas of their daily life where you can intervene to help them.



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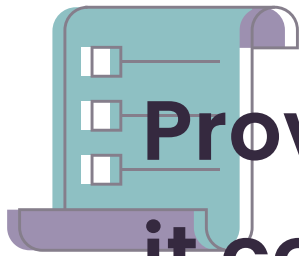


Do not make food a control battle.

Your child's story has deeply impacted him and if you choose to make food something to argue over, you will create tension where there needs to be teamwork. Partner with your child to help them overcome their food challenges by first understanding why they have them.

Some of our children ate the same things every day and your new choices are uncomfortable. Some of our children only ate fast food. Ask them to tell you what food was like in their home.

Do you have a picky eater? Introduce new foods slowly alongside the foods that are comfortable to them. Over time, as they begin to feel safe, they'll open up their choices and you'll be able to get them to eat more variety. Until then, get creative and let the rest go!



Provide predictability when it comes to food.

Even though you know you plan to feed your child three meals today and that the pantry is full of lots of snack options for them to choose from, your insecure child may not. Here are some tangible ways you can help ease their fears by providing consistency and predictability with food:



If it works for your family's lifestyle, consider having meals and snacks at consistent times every day. Have them written into a daily schedule posted somewhere in your home for your child to visually see. Just knowing that you remembered to put "food" on the calendar can be enough to calm their fears.



Meal plan what you'll have for lunch and dinner each week and post a meal schedule in the home visible for all members. If your insecure child is too young to read—draw pictures or print out pictures for them. When they ask you what the meal is for the day, point them to the schedule so they eventually start checking there first to calm their own fears.



If meal planning a week out doesn't work for your lifestyle, then try deciding what lunch and dinner will be each morning and just writing a daily meal plan for them to see. You could make this a part of your evening or morning rhythm with your child to help calm their fears that there won't be enough food or that you will somehow "forget" to feed them (a real concern for a lot of our children).



Schedule a mid-morning, afternoon, and before bed snack time for your children. This keeps children from rummaging through cabinets looking for food when you might not like them to.



If you have a child who has a hard time waiting for meal time, consider using timers or countdowns as a way for them to “see” how much time is left. Give them a watch they can wear and show them when the next meal time is (Example: We eat when this clock says 5:00). If they ask you questions about meals, direct them to check the daily schedule or their watch. If they struggle with this task by themselves, stop what you are doing and look with them. A few times of helping them and they’ll begin to get it on their own.



If they ask for a snack while you are cooking, instead of simply saying “No, dinner will be ready in 10 minutes,” meet their need. Say “Yes, dinner is almost ready. Do you want to grab something from your snack jar and hold it in your hand or put it by your plate on the table?” Sometimes giving that simple “yes” with a plan can be what helps get them through the wait until dinner. If even this is too hard for them, let them eat the snack or try to invite them into the cooking experience to keep them busy and nearby.



Share control with them.

When we feel in control of a situation, our fear responses are less likely to be activated. So, we need to share control with our children when it comes to food. Here are some ways to do that:



When you welcome a new child into your home, ask them about their favorite foods. Buy some of them even if it's not what your family normally eats. Doing this will help the child feel seen and cared for.



Consider having a snack basket on the counter (and in the fridge for cold items) that you restock every day/week. Have your children choose a few of their favorite items to be included in the basket. Then let them know that during snack times, they can head to these spots and pick something they'd like to eat. This serves as a visual for your insecure child who needs to "see" that snacks are available. Sometimes just seeing that the basket has food in it is enough to calm the fear responses in their brain. Tip: Have more than one child who will argue over the snacks in the basket? Give each child in your family a snack basket of their own. Fill it every day or once a week and let them eat only snacks from their own basket. Or better yet, let them refill the snack baskets each week.



Some of your children might have a deep food insecurity at night. For these children, it helps to have a smaller basket of snacks (just a couple) available to them on their bedside table while sleeping. Let them know that if they wake in the middle of the night and are hungry, they can reach up and grab a snack. If you're worried about the mess, include a small trashcan and ask them to empty it each morning. While your child might at first eat all the snacks every night, over time, as their brain realizes they are safe and food is available, you should see a decrease in this behavior. Over time for most children, the intervention will no longer be needed.



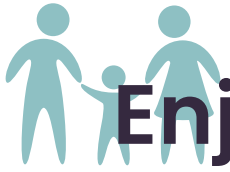
Invite them to sit down every week and help you meal plan. Have them write the weekly meals on a chalkboard or piece of paper to hang on the refrigerator.



Take them grocery shopping with you. Ask them to help you unload the groceries and put them away so that they can see and feel that there is enough food in the house for everyone.



Let them cook with you in the kitchen. Let them prepare their own meals. Let them cook a meal for the family if they are older. Let them serve portions on plates for the family and set the table.




Enjoy food rituals as a family.

Use food to promote connection, bonding & attachment within the family. Enjoy food themed family rituals: Taco Tuesday, pizza and a movie night, summer barbeques, Saturday morning donut runs, etc.

These activities help the child to associate food with family connection. Be playful with food: Feed your child even if they can feed themselves, toss food in each other's mouths to try to catch it, close your eyes and put small candies in each other's mouths to guess the flavors, bake together, use food to make crafts or sensory activities.

Just enjoy food with your child!



Be proactive if you are going to be away from your kitchen.

Food insecurities can strike your child at any moment, so you'll need to proactively plan for these moments when you leave your house to avoid meltdowns. Here are some ideas:



Place a small cooler in your car, and keep it stocked with water bottles and snacks.



Encourage your children to grab a snack for the road when taking longer car rides.



Carry a bookbag or purse with snacks in it when you are out and about.



Let the child know in advance what the food situation will be for long days away from home such as vacations, road trips, day trips to the zoo, a family's birthday party, etc. Giving them a plan will help them feel safe.



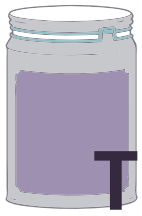
Help your child handle food issues when you're not with them.

It is highly likely that if your child has food insecurities at home, they're having them other places as well. We need a plan to address those challenges too. Here are a few ideas:

Talk to the teacher or daycare provider about your child's insecurities and ask that they be given snack breaks throughout the day. Consider sharing some of the ways you are handling these insecurities in predictable ways at home, as there may be a way to duplicate these interventions elsewhere as well.

If the teacher will not cooperate, find someone at the school who will listen to your concerns. Could the child be given permission to go to the nurse's office for a snack if it is needed?

Before leaving for school each day, consider having your child pack a snack in his bookbag just so he knows it is there if needed. This step alone can help calm his fear response.



Try a "Yes Jar."

One helpful intervention that TBRI gives us is the "yes jar." The idea behind the "yes jar" is to be able to provide our children with a lot of acceptable "yeses" so they learn to trust us and we build up connection, so that when we have to say "no" they accept it more readily.

The "yes jar" can include any number of things that are appropriate for your family, including snacks or treats. This could include gum, lollipops, fresh fruit, granola bars, or other non-edible items that a child can have as often as they want to throughout the day.

The only rule is they must "ask with good eyes and good words." If a child looks at you and says "May I have an applesauce?" you give a yes, a high five, and the item the child has requested. If they take it themselves without asking, you simply give them a do-over by saying, "Woah woah, I didn't hear you ask. Can you try that again?" They do it over and you cheer, high five, and move on.

While this whole idea might seem counter-intuitive or you might wonder if you should say "yes" to the fifth piece of bubble gum, we promise that you are building a foundation with this child that matters. Over the months that the child is with you, you will likely see their felt safety and connection increase and their need for these items decrease. Eventually, the tool may no longer be needed for your family as you've helped them learn you are a safe authority who will provide for their wants and needs.

Yes Jar Tips:

- Put the jar where everyone in the family can see it, and explain what it is before you start using it.
- Only put items in the jar that you can say "yes" to.
- Put only the number of items you are comfortable with the children having in the jar each day. For example, put three pieces of gum in the jar every morning, and that's it!
- Have a set time the "yes jar" opens and closes each day. For example, it could open after breakfast and close after dinner.
- For children who repeatedly ask for the "yes jar", consider saying "yes" to a child and then trying to engage the child in an activity right after you give them the item. It's possible they also are wanting some connection with you but don't know how to say it!



Practice outside of the moment.

Another TBRI strategy is to practice challenges before they happen, when the child is happy and regulated. You can help them understand their food insecurities by talking about their story, giving them words to understand that their brain can get hungry, and then discussing through play how to get these needs met appropriately.

Use an item such as a puppet, doll, or dinosaur, or just act it out yourselves. Have the child practice listening to his body and then going to a safe adult and asking for a snack. Practice using the “yes jar” together. Role play being the child who is hungry and your child can be the safe adult who helps you meet your needs.

Remember, only do this when your child is in a good state of mind and ready to learn and have fun with it.

Then when he has a rough moment later in the day, you can say, “Ok remember, what are you supposed to do when you get angry? Do you think your brain is hungry?”



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