

EQUIPPED FOR THE JOURNEY

# Food Insecurities





Food is an important part of our daily lives and it's essential to our survival. It's fuel for our brains and bodies and can wake us up, regulate us, and bring us comfort. But it's also a social activity and something we do in relationship with others. As a society, most of our gatherings, celebrations, and holidays are heavily focused on food. Right now, you probably can recall a favorite family memory that involves a specially prepared meal or treat.

However, for the children we are welcoming into our homes through foster care, food doesn't always invoke these warm and happy memories. For some of our children, food was scarce and something you had to find on your own, maybe even steal to get. For some of our children, food was withheld, something you got if you were "good." For some of our children, food was used as a weapon. For our children, there may not have been any routines around food, family meals, or table manners. And even some of our littlest ones may not have been fed on demand as newborns but had to wait for unpredictable patterns of care to fill their hungry bellies.

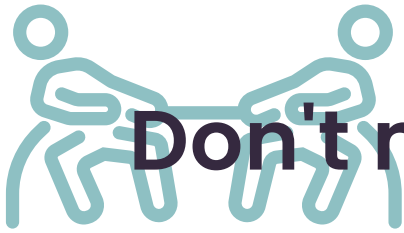
Many of our children did not experience food within the context of a loving, nurturing, predictable family. And because of this, they may have developed beliefs and behaviors around food that are less than ideal.

***Hoarding. Stealing. Lying. Eating non-edible items. Overeating to the point of getting sick. Obsessions and compulsions around the idea of food. Being extremely picky.***

If any of 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, over time these food insecurities can diminish. 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 ways that you can support them. Here are some of our favorite ideas to support your child as they begin to grow their security around food. .

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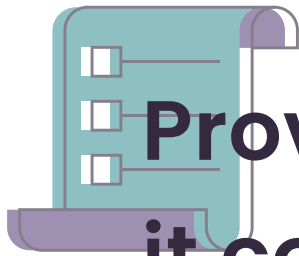


# Don't make food a control battle.

Our children's stories have deeply impacted them and if we choose to make food something to argue over, we will create tension where there needs to be teamwork. Partnering with our children to help them overcome their food challenges by first understanding why they have them is critical.

Some of our children ate the same things every day and our new choices are uncomfortable. Some of our children only ate fast food. When a new child moves in, we should ask them to tell us what food was like in their home so we can consider the ways we can bridge the gap between what it used to be like and what it's now like in our homes. We should buy them some of their favorite foods even if it isn't what we normally like to eat.

Have a picky eater? Introduce new foods slowly alongside the foods that are comfortable for them. Over time, as they begin to feel safe, they'll open up their choices and we'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 we know we plan to feed our children three meals today and that the pantry is full of lots of snack options for them to choose from, our food insecure child may not. That might not be what their history tells them. Here are some tangible ways we can help ease their fears by providing consistency and predictability with food:



If it works for our family's lifestyle, we can consider having meals and snacks at consistent times every day. Having them written into a daily schedule posted somewhere in the home for our child to visually see also provides felt-safety. Just knowing that we remembered to put "food" on the schedule can be enough to begin to bring calm to these specific fears.



We can meal plan what we'll have for lunch and/or dinner each week and post a meal schedule in the home visible for all members. If our food insecure child is too young to read—we can use pictures instead of words. When they ask us what the meal is for the day, we can 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 our lifestyle, then we can try deciding what lunch and dinner will be each morning and just writing a daily meal plan for them to see. We could make this a part of our evening or morning rhythms with our child to help calm their fears that there won't be enough food or that we will somehow "forget" to feed them (a real concern for a lot of our children).



We can schedule a mid-morning, afternoon, and before bed snack time for our children. This can keep children from rummaging through cabinets looking for food when we might not like them to.

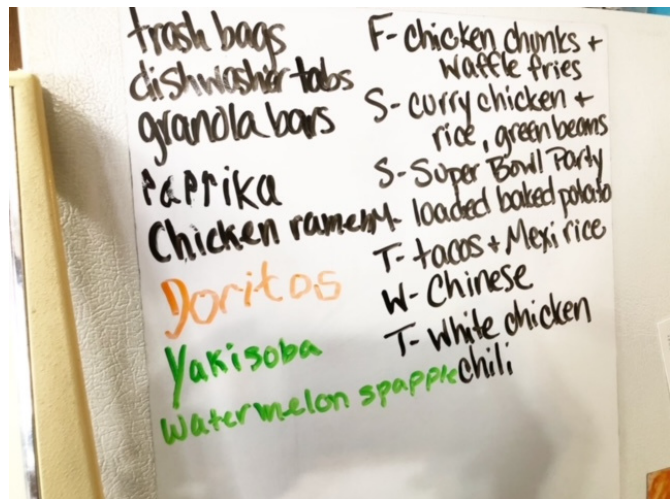
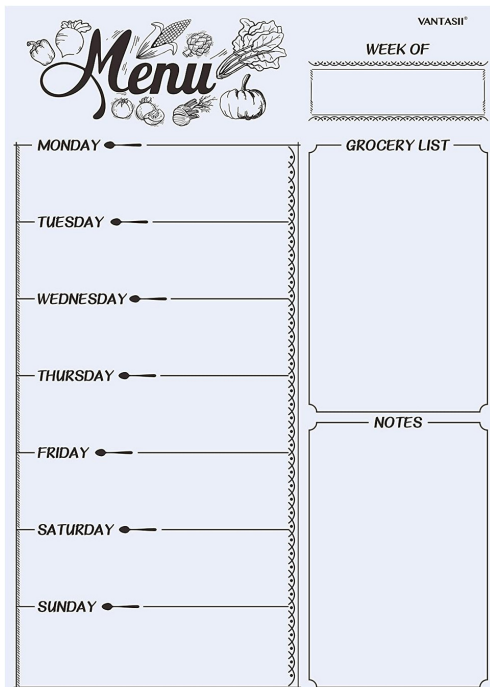




If we have a child who has a hard time waiting for meal time, we can consider using timers or countdowns as a way for them to “see” how much time remains. We can give them a watch they can wear and show them when the next meal time is (Example: We eat when this clock says 5:00). If they ask us questions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



For a child who asks for a snack while we are cooking, instead of simply saying “No, dinner will be ready in 10 minutes,” we need to consider how we can meet their need. Instead we can say something like, “Yes, dinner is almost ready. Do you want to grab something from your snack basket 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. Overtime, this should decrease as the child becomes more secure with food.



...or you can simply write them down on a piece of paper on the fridge

You can purchase a small whiteboard that organizes meals for the week



Timers can help with regulation while waiting for a meal



# Share control with them.

When we feel in control of a situation, our fear responses are less likely to be activated. When it applies to feeling insecure about food, there are a lot of easy things we can do to give our children back some of the control that was taken from them. Here are some ways to do that:



When we welcome a new child into our home, we can ask them about their favorite foods and buy some of them even if it's not what our family normally eats. Doing this will help the child feel seen and cared for. Then we can introduce new foods we want the child to try alongside ones we know he will eat.



Consider having a snack basket on the counter (and in the fridge for cold items) that gets restocked every day. Our children can choose a few of their favorite items to be included in the basket. Then we can 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 our 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: If we have more than one child who will argue over the snacks in the basket, we can give each child in our family a snack basket of their own. We can 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 day alongside us as this is an opportunity to share some control and tangibly show them there is enough food.



Some of our 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 we're worried about the mess, include a small trashcan and ask them to empty it each morning. While our child might at first eat all the snacks every night, over time, as their brain realizes they are safe and food is available, we should see a decrease in this behavior. Over time for most children, the intervention will no longer be needed.



We can share control over what we are eating by inviting them to sit down every week and help us meal plan. We can invite them to choose a meal to eat for dinner. We can find a new recipe together. We can have them write the weekly meals on a whiteboard or piece of paper to hang on the refrigerator so that they know there is a plan for food that week.



We can take them grocery shopping with us. We can ask them to help us unload the groceries and put them away so that they can see and feel that there is enough food in the house for everyone.



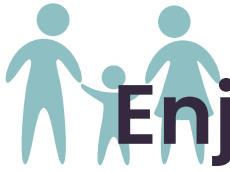
We can invite them to cook alongside us in the kitchen. We can let them prepare their own meals. If they are older, we can let them cook a meal for the entire family. If they are younger, we can let them serve portions on plates for the family and help us set the table.



A snack basket example



Kids helping prepare the snack basket



# Enjoy food rituals as a family.

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

These activities help the child to positively associate food with fun family connection. We can even be playful with food by: Feeding our child even if he can feed himself, tossing food in each other's mouths to try to catch it, closing our eyes and putting small candies in each other's mouths to guess the flavors, baking together, and using food to make crafts or sensory activities.

***Overtime, these things can show our child that food can be safe and fun again!***





# Be proactive when away from the kitchen.

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



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



Encourage our children to grab a snack for the road before leaving the house.



Carry a bookbag or purse with snacks in it when we 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, an extended family's birthday party, etc. Giving them a plan will help them feel safe.



# Help the child handle food issues when we're not with them.

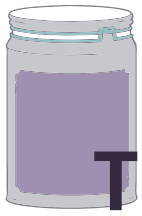
It is highly likely that if our child has food insecurities at home, they're having them other places as well. It can help to have a plan to address challenges outside of the home as well. Here are a few ideas:

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

If the first person you talk to dismisses your request, find someone else at the school/daycare who will listen to the concerns. If the child is unable to eat a snack in the classroom, maybe he could be given permission to go to the nurse's office for a snack if it is needed?

If our child is having challenging behaviors right before lunch or while waiting in line for lunch, maybe lunchtime needs to be handled a little differently in order for them to be successful. We can talk to the school or daycare about what options exist if we see this pattern with our child.

If snacks are allowed, then consider having the child pack a snack in his bookbag himself each morning so he knows it is there if needed. This step alone can help calm his fear response, even if he never actually eats it.



# Try a "Yes Basket."

One helpful intervention that TBRI gives us is the "yes basket." The idea behind the "yes basket" 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 basket" 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?" we give a yes, a high five, and the item the child has requested. If they take it themselves without asking, we 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 we praise them, high five, and move on.

While this whole idea might seem counter-intuitive or we might wonder if we should say "yes" to the fifth piece of bubble gum, we promise that we are building a foundation with this child that matters. Over the months that the child is with us, we 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 our family as we've helped them learn we are a safe authority who will provide for their wants and needs.

## Yes Basket Tips:

- Put the basket where everyone in the family can see it, and explain what it is before using it.
- If there are multiple children using the basket and we are concerned about "sharing," make each child their own basket.
- Only put items in the basket that we can say "yes" to.
- Put only the number of items in the basket we are comfortable with the children having each day. For example, put three pieces of gum in the jar every morning, and that's it!
- Have a set time the basket opens and closes each day. For example, it could open after breakfast and close after dinner.
- For children who repeatedly ask for the items, 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 are wanting some connection with us but don't know how to say it! Spending time with them can delay their need to ask for another item.



# Practice outside of the moment.

Another TBRI strategy is to practice challenges before they happen, when the child is happy and regulated. We 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 hunger needs met more appropriately.

*For younger children, 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 basket” together. Role play by having the adult be the child who is hungry and the child be the safe adult who helps meet the child's 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, we can say, “Ok remember, what are you supposed to do when you get angry? Do you think your brain is hungry?”

For developmentally older youth, role-playing may not be appropriate but you can still have proactive conversations with the youth about how food fuels their bodies and what their behaviors might be telling them about what their bodies need. Then you can discuss appropriate ways to get those needs met together.



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