

Going Out To Eat

Introduction

In this module you will learn about what you can do to make going out to eat a manageable experience for your family.

While going out to eat can be a nice way for families to spend quality time together, going to a restaurant with young children, or children with special needs can pose challenges. New experiences can be challenging for an individual with autism and children on the spectrum appreciate predictability. Dining out means taking your child into an entirely new environment, and asking them to cope with unpredictable sights, sounds, smells and tastes.

Preparing in Advance

Here are some options to consider as you plan your visit to a restaurant.

1. **Selecting the right place** – When you select a restaurant, consider the environment at the restaurant. Is it too stimulating or loud? Is it extremely busy during meal times, and will you have to wait? Do they have the type of food your child will like? Pick a place that you know will accommodate any food sensitivities or allergies that your family may have, and will seat you quickly when you go. Advanced reservations can be helpful. You may also want to consider restaurants where the food is served relatively quickly, rather than ones with long wait times. You can also request to be seated in your preferred section of the restaurant when you call for reservations.
2. **Time of Day Matters** – Plan to eat out when your child is hungry but not cranky. A late dinner might be harder for them to manage than an early lunch or dinner.
3. **Take along activities** – Take small toys or activities along to keep them occupied. A coloring book or small fidget

toys can keep children busy while they wait for their meal. Playing family “games” at the table or offering electronic devices to keep your child entertained may be helpful while they wait for their meal or for others to finish eating. Taking a small snack for them to eat before their meal can also keep a child occupied. .

4. **Try take-out first** – If you are concerned about your child liking or eating a new food at a particular restaurant, you can test the food out by ordering it as take-out in advance, and allowing your child to eat it in the comfort of their own home. If they like it, you know that the restaurant is an option. If they don't, you can explore other foods on the menu, or choose a different restaurant.
5. **Ordering ahead of time** – If your child has a hard time waiting for the food to be served, you can call the restaurant ahead of time, and explain your situation to see if they will take your order over the phone, and have a meal ready for you when you arrive. If this is not a possibility, you can see if your partner, or another member of your party can walk around with your child outside the restaurant as you order and wait for the food to be prepared, and then have your child join you when the food has been served.

Preparing Your Child to Eat Out

You can also teach your child about what to expect when they go out to eat. Here are some tools you can use to prepare them.

1. **Social Stories** – Social Stories can be a very useful tool to use to prepare your child for “going out to eat”. . You can write a social story with details about how you will get to the restaurant, how you will be seated, what type of food you will be served, table manners to observe during the meal and behaviors that your child

should and should not display at the restaurant. Use pictures or other visual supports to bring your story to life. You can learn more about how to create a social story by referring to our module on Social Stories. A social story will prepare your child for the change in their daily routine.

2. **Role Plays** – You can practice eating a restaurant, by role playing the outing. You can role play interactions with a server, and how you will sit at a table and use utensils to eat your meal. You can encourage your child to display desired behaviors throughout the role play.
3. **Teaching table manners** – While teaching a child table manners takes time and practice, there are some basic table manners which you should review with your child. Using utensils to eat, and not throwing food around are important at a restaurant. You can also talk about using an inside voice, and staying seated through an entire meal rather than wandering around a restaurant. Reviewing these basic table manners can go a long way in making your meal more enjoyable.

We hope that you have found these ideas useful. Remember, creating a special needs trust requires working with a professional who can guide you through the process. You can find additional resources on our website:

www.porchlighteducation.org.

Conclusion

While there are many things you can do to prepare yourself and your child to eat out, there may be times when it will be hard for your child to sit through an entire meal. Don't feel disheartened if you need to leave before the end of your meal. Almost all parents experience times when eating out does not go the way they had planned. Remember to be patient and have reasonable expectations. You may want to start out by simply visiting a restaurant but not staying for an entire meal, and perhaps just ordering a drink or a treat. Over time, you can build up to a longer experience. Eating out is a skill that you can practice with your child over time, hopefully they will begin to enjoy trying new foods and restaurants.