



## Managing Stressful Times with a Picky Eater or Problem Feeder

Many families are being faced with their children having to stay home from school for the next few weeks because of the Coronavirus. Forced time at home can raise everyone's stress, but even more so if your family is living with a Picky Eater or a Problem Feeder.

Let's talk first about why being home from school is harder on children with feeding challenges.

1. Being home from school creates a disruption in your child's usual schedule. Disruptions in routines and schedules are often difficult for children who don't eat well, especially those children who struggle with sensory sensitivities. Not having meals and snacks at the time your child is used to can really disrupt their hunger and fullness cycles.
2. Dr. Toomey likes to say that "emotions are contagious". When we, as adults, are stressed and worried about the impact of the Coronavirus on our lives, our children can pick up those reactions with their "emotional antennae". So, when we are stressed, our children can become stressed too. Stress is a particular problem for children with feeding difficulties because our stress hormone, Adrenaline (= your fight, flight or fright chemical), negatively impacts the body systems your child needs to eat well.

When your child's Adrenaline is high, the following happens at mealtimes:

- a. Adrenaline suppresses your child's appetite directly by telling his/her brain to shut off all appetite signals. This is because in stressful situations, the body wants you to fix the stressor (run away from or fight off that predator) and not worry about eating. So, the more stressed your child is coming into the meal, the less appetite he/she is going to have and the less willing he/she is going to be to eat.
- b. Adrenaline tells your child's GI tract to shunt all the blood from the intestines to the arms and legs so you can run away or fight that predator. The result here is that if your child is getting stressed before or during the meal, they are not going to be able to digest the calories that they do eat.
- c. Adrenaline shifts your child into "react mode" versus "learning/thinking mode". This means that they are probably going to be more over reactive if the food/meal is not their version of "perfect" and tantrums will be more likely. If they tantrum, they are turning on even more Adrenaline. It is a vicious cycle.

3. Kids may be missing out on their regularly scheduled movement opportunities, including recess, PE, therapy, sports practices, and playdates. For any human being experiencing stress, staying physically active is critical to maintaining our mental health.

# Strategies to Reduce Stress

- **Minimize changes when possible.** Try your very best to keep your child on their usual eating schedule, and find a loose routine that works for your family.
  - Even though everyone might be home together, **try to keep meals consistent.** For example, you might still serve your child the same lunch they would normally have, even though you are home instead of at school.
  - Try to **avoid the kitchen being "open" all day long.** Stick to normal meal and snack times, as we know kids who graze end up eating fewer calories over the course of the day.
- **Incorporate movement activities, even if you are stuck in your house.**
  - **Outdoor time** (especially if it is in your backyard or avoids playground equipment) is still encouraged in many areas. Family walks, bike, or scooter rides can be a great way to get everyone moving and out of the house for a bit. Even taking inside toys outside for an hour or so can break up the day.
  - **Stuck inside?** Put on some music and have a dance party. Look online for "indoor movement activities" or scroll social media to find ideas. Think about what kind of movement your child likes, and see how you can incorporate more of that into your daily schedule.
  - Now might be a great time to **build in some yoga or deep breathing**, as this helps counterbalance our stress hormones. Some great yoga and meditation websites for kids include:
    - Class Dojo - <https://www.classdojo.com/>
    - Cosmic Kids – <https://www.cosmickids.com/>
    - Insight Timer - <https://insighttimer.com/>
- **Anticipate events that may cause increased stress in your child(ren)**, such as being worried about running out of a preferred food or missing therapy appointments.
  - Remind kids that even though things might feel a worrisome and confusing, the Helpers in our world are working together to keep everyone safe (including Mom and Dad, Grandmom and Granddad, Nanny, Teachers etc)
  - Let them know that they can come and talk to you about any of their worries any time. Together, you will figure out how to make it better.

# Suggestions for Moving Forward

- **Involve your child(ren) in food prep and clean up, and find ways to make it fun!** Many families are finding that they are all home together, so this could be the perfect opportunity to get your kids into the kitchen with you. You can find a new recipe online, or make a family favorite. We also have lots of suggestions in the Picky Eater Membership level for how to get your kids involved in mealtimes.
- **Have your child(ren) help you to plan the meals and snacks you will have over this next week.** This will help minimize mealtime conflict and it will help you prepare your grocery list well in advance. It also frees you up to focus on other things rather than worrying about "what's for dinner" every day. Hopefully, this decreases your stress too!
- **Find ways to connect with loved ones and friends, even while practicing Social Distancing.** Video calls (skype, facetime, zoom etc.) can be a great way to stay connected. You can play games, read books, sing songs, have a dance party, or tell jokes. You could even cook a favorite dish with your favorite friend!
- Don't forget to include some "down time" where each person in the family gets to choose to do **a quiet activity by themselves**. We all need some "alone time" to choose what we want to do, as independently as is age appropriate.