



Helping Children Master New Experiences: DIR® Applied to Increasing Flexibility Around Eating

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One of the most difficult challenges for parents and therapists is to help children become more flexible eaters. This happens particularly when the children are rigid, stubborn, and narrow in their choices. It is often due to sensory processing differences, where particular tastes and smells may be aversive and lots of controlling behavior has developed to minimize surprises.

The strategy, which is based on the DIR® model, involves harnessing the child's initiative and problem-solving and, if possible, verbal or symbolic mastery. This is done in the context of pleasurable, regulating experiences and the gradual modulation of sensory overreactivity in areas of taste and smell. The strategy involves first establishing shared attention and engagement with the child through Floortime play and then in eating contexts. A critical step is to reduce any anxiety from a history of power struggles around eating and replace it with calm, regulating experiences. Again, this begins simply with regular Floortime sessions where a child is tuned into at his functional level in terms of his sensory profile, with nurturing and follow the child's interest-type interactions. As one takes this now soothing, regulating, pleasurable relationship to the eating situation, one is likely to see increased anxieties and negative behaviors. It's therefore important, once having established pleasurable, soothing interactions in play, to establish this around eating as well. Therefore, begin with foods the child enjoys and tolerates well and don't try to introduce new foods or stretch the child's capacities at the outset.

Once having established pleasure in a soothing, warm relationship, create opportunities for the child to show purposeful communication patterns (i.e., initiative) by allowing the child to reject certain foods and select others. Here we have the child making choices, but doing so as part of two-way, back-and-forth communication. If the child can open and close many circles in a row and problem-solve, he can put the foods that he doesn't like in one basket or area and those he does like and wants to eat in another. In that way, he's not only being intentional, he's solving problems. If he can use ideas and words, he can begin labeling the piles and if he can build bridges between ideas, he can explain what makes one pile desirable and the other not desirable (i.e., why he likes certain foods and doesn't like others). If he's able to do multi-causal thinking, gray-area thinking, and comparative thinking, he can elaborate on the degree to which he likes one group of foods better than another and provide multiple reasons for liking this better than that, this or that much. If he's progressed to the point of thinking off an internal sense of self and internal standard, he can even evaluate and judge how his eating patterns compare to most people's, etc.

Engaging him up to the highest level he's capable of, beginning with shared attention, engagement, and simple purposeful actions, all the way up to putting his feelings into ideas and reflecting on his ideas, establishes a deeper and deeper, pleasurable, soothing relationship surrounding the activity at hand. It's important to emphasize that the tone of this interaction and dialogue should not be confrontational or demanding, but one of



establishing pleasurable, soothing, nurturing interactions. Remember, at this point he or she is choosing foods, explaining why some foods are better than other (if he or she is very verbal) and if not very verbal, simply putting the better foods into the better group.

Once this baseline is established, we can then begin the gradual process of stretching the child's capacities. It is important to emphasize, however, that half the work has already been accomplished in that the child, hopefully by this point, is no longer associating the activity, such as eating, with power struggles and anxiety.

Now we begin the process of helping the child stretch his capacities, which we should expect at a minimum, he will have mixed feelings about. He may know, at some level, that it's in his interest to become more flexible, but if he's very sensory reactive and if he has motor planning problems, he is likely to quickly become overwhelmed and anxious and possibly, therefore, aggressive and impulsive or tantrummy. The goal, therefore, is to begin expanding his horizons in a very, very gradual and soothing manner in the context of pleasurable interactions. For example, we should slowly introduce new textures, smells, and tastes, building initially on ones that are close to those he already likes. Working with all his senses at the same time—touch, smell, taste, sight, etc., enables him to begin mastering new sensations utilizing all his senses.

For some children, it's helpful to provide supportive sensory experiences, such as firm pressure in the mouth to make it easier for the child to tolerate new textures. This type of oral massage needs to be guided, however, by an experienced occupational therapist or speech pathologist, but it can often be a helpful adjunct to the child enhancing

his or her flexibility. Similarly, different types of oral-motor exercises, involving certain types of textures may open the child up for greater acceptance of other textures and tastes.

To the degree that he can encourage the child to participate in the action with you, i.e., direct the airplane that's carrying his food into his mouth or, even better, hold the airplane and help direct it into his mouth. Here, in addition to being very gradual in this process, it's important to combine the difficult new experience, even if it's just a small step of a new experience, with pleasurable, familiar interactions. For example, trying a little bit of the rice with one or two peas might quickly be followed with a bite of a favorite food treat or an opportunity to play briefly with a favorite toy. Maintaining a warm, playful attitude while engaging in this exploration of new experiences, is critical.

Another component that often needs to be present is structure and limits, which demand a certain firmness, persistence, and ultimately, belief in the success of the endeavor by the adults. The child, for example, will need to experience in a calm manner the firmness of the adult in sticking with the plan, even if the child has a tantrum or two or tries to wiggle out of the chair. The adult doesn't yell or scream or intimidate or frighten the child. The adult conveys a sense of infinite patience, coupled with firmness and persistence, where the child gets the sense, "I could be here all day unless I try one or two new things and then I can go down and play with those wonderful toys or get to eat some of my favorite treats."

What we're doing is coupling a warm, soothing, supportive challenge to try some new sensations with the inherent reward of increased flexibility and capacity to enjoy one's world and with the short-term reward being able to play,



enjoy favorite food treats, and maintain the respectful, soothing relationship that the caregiver has started in the first place.

Obviously, this won't happen overnight, but if the pattern is put into effect a number of times a day, in a surprising way most children will gradually become more flexible over the course of a few weeks—some even shorter. There tends to be an exponential increase in flexibility as well. Once the logjam is freed, the child tends to ease into a pattern of new exploration. Of course, some children are more finicky and stubborn than others and this may have to do with just how sensitive and reactive their sensory systems are as well as their history with their caregivers (i.e., to what degree they've become firmly entrenched in their negativism). Nonetheless, patience and persistence will start a new kind of relationship and a sense of mastery. This strategy can be applied, obviously, to different food groups, each with its own textures, smells, tastes, and visual patterns.

There may be many tricks to make the steps of mastery smaller than would

otherwise be the case, such as mashing something new into something tried and true. This makes the new taste very gradual. Parents and therapists should explore different ways of implementing these general principles. The important point to emphasize are these general principles that can accommodate to wide range of different strategies.

In the foregoing discussion, we have addressed eating and trying out new foods. This same strategy and set of principles, however, can be applied to any new activity, such as new types of clothing, new colors, new types of toys, new types of play with other children, mastering new learning, and so forth. It can also be approached to master transitions, such as getting ready for sleep. The key point is to frame the new task in the context of the principles outlined above. That creates a spirit of collaboration and mastery in the context of multiple sensory pathways, problem-solving actions, and, where possible, verbal or other types of symbolic comprehension.

Juice of Life

By

A 10 Year Old Poet

Living juicy isn't just a one day thing.
It is an everyday thing,
it is your growing older,
it is your manners, good or not,
it is everything you do: write, film, sing, make music,
watch that awful, awful TV.
It is also an invisible mark that is on your forehead who marks who you are,
and what you are,
and to be glad of it.
It is a sign of truth, lies and fate.
It is telling everyone, and teaching you, to realize
nobody is normal.
I repeat, no one.