

The Green Monsters to the Rescue!

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It's not easy dealing with a picky eater. You know the ones that only eat breads, crackers and chips or what others refer to as the "white diet" and refuse to eat healthy foods like fruits, vegetables and meats. Some gag or vomit every time they smell, touch or see a food they don't like. Parents report they are making two and three different meals so their children will eat. Or parents give in and let them eat pancakes or bagels and juice for dinner so "at least they are eating something!"

Sensory integration (SI) issues are often thought to be the cause of why children get caught in this never ending cycle. According to A. Jean Ayres, Ph. D., the person who first researched and coined the phrase, sensory integration is the ability to take in information through our senses (touch, movement, smell, taste, vision, and hearing), to put it together with prior information (memories and knowledge stored in the brain), and to make a meaningful response. When SI issues are notable enough, children are sometimes diagnosed with a sensory processing disorder. Sensory processing disorder and sensory integration are used interchangeably.

The child who presents with sensory integration issues may have difficulty with taking in and sorting information through their senses especially when eating. Eating involves sorting and reading enormous amounts of sensory data from taste to texture to temperature to color. To control the overwhelming sensations, children with sensory issues are often picky and controlling around food. They might prefer crunchy, salty snacks over mixed textured or harder to chew healthy foods like fruits, vegetables or meats. Chips and crackers give more feedback when put in the mouth and are ultimately easier to eat. In other words, they can hear and feel the crunch while eating them and their saliva can easily melt down these foods so the child does not have to chew and manipulate the food very much in order to swallow it.

These foods also "taste" better because they are highly processed with salt and/or sugar. Less work makes it easier for the child to handle. They can be picked up and manipulated easily as well. However, these highly processed foods are addicting and relying on food with poor nutritional value may prevent the sensory system from maturing.

According to Kelly Dorfman, MS, LND and author of *What's Eating Your Child*, 2011, highly processed foods

are nutrient deficient and may lower zinc and vitamin B levels changing the child's sense of taste and smell. Children may not look "malnourished" because they are gaining weight but the calories they are eating aren't providing the nutrients they need for optimal development. The lack of nutrients in their diet could cause permanent damage to their neurological system and, therefore, are a possible cause of the sensory integration and regulation difficulties they present. She recommends a two-step nutrition therapy approach that can help alleviate the child's feeding difficulties:

1. Take away what's bothering the patient
2. Close the gap of nutritional deficiency

When working with children with sensory integration difficulties, we must first look at what may be bothering the child's GI track. If this is a very young infant or toddler, the culprit is most usually dairy foods since they are mostly what the child is eating. Common symptoms of dairy protein intolerance include ear infections, constipation, eczema, and/or chronic congestion. Taking away what's irritating them, can take pressure off the already overloaded sensory system and improve its functioning.

Closing the gap of nutritional deficiency is the next step. Ms. Dorfman often recommends probiotics, fish oils and therapeutic multivitamins/minerals. The probiotics help improve digestive functions. Therapeutic multiple vitamins and minerals can help improve appetite and immune function and fish oil contains fat necessary for operating the nervous system. Since sensory processing difficulties stem from immaturity in neurological development, the right kind of fat is critical.

Once the child has the nutritional support in place, a specific feeding program is designed to improve variety, texture and volume of solid foods. That's where the **Green Monster** book series plays a valuable role. These books are specifically designed to teach the parent and the child why it's important to eat a healthy diet in a child friendly way complete with pictures to color and magic wands to make the green monsters come alive and tell their story! Soon, the children learn the Green Monsters are really their friends and become more willing to start the process of trying new foods and changing the way they think about food in the long term.

**For more information about the Green Monster four book series, see our ad on the opposite page. They can be purchased through our office or online at diannelazer.com or amazon.com.*

