

Supporting Children Who Move Around During Mealtimes

If your child finds it difficult to sit at the table for meals, try not to worry. For some children, movement helps them stay calm, comfortable and ready to eat. Right now, eating is more important than sitting. Walking around, fidgeting or leaving the table is not always a sign of 'bad behaviour'. It may be your child's way of meeting their sensory or regulation needs while they eat.

Focus on
engagement, not
perfection.

Why may they be moving around?

Be a Detective

- They may be seeking sensory input
- They may need additional postural support
- Mealtime demands may be overwhelming (e.g. smells, textures and expectations)

What can help?

Keeping mealtime expectations realistic

- Start with short sitting periods (e.g. 2–5 minutes), gradually increasing as appropriate
- Focus on engagement, not perfection.
- Some movement is developmentally appropriate for children
- **Success = participation, not complete stillness**

Have a look at our handout on postural support for strategies to support your child's positioning during mealtime

[Click here for:](#) 
[Video](#)
[Handout](#)

Build Movement into the Mealtime Routines

Preparation for the meal

- Helping to carry the food to the table
- Stir or mix the ingredients while preparing food
- Wipe the table
- Take rubbish to the bin, or empty the bin

When sitting for the meal

You can try:

- Wobble cushions
- A TheraBand around the chair legs to push their feet against

Think about the Environment

- Gradually introduce new foods and textures
- Reduce overwhelming stimuli, such as strong smells and loud noises
- Limit the number of people in the room
- Offer choices to increase a sense of control
- Use predictable mealtime routines (e.g. eat at the same time, eat at the same spot at the table, same chair and follow the same steps i.e. Wash hands, set table, get drinks etc.)

Positive Communication During Mealtimes

When teaching a child a new skill or giving them an instruction, it is important that your communication is clear. You can do this by phrasing your instruction with what you want your child to do, not what you don't want them to do.

Instead of:

“don't throw your food on the floor”

“stop getting up from the chair”

You can say:

“food stays on the table”

“we sit on the chair when we are eating”

Use visual cues and aids to support your communication during mealtimes



Positive reinforcement of engagement
e.g., “you sat at the table to eat your chicken, well done”



Click [here](#) for more information about creating a positive mealtime experience



Children often use movement to help their bodies feel ready for eating and joining in at mealtimes. By recognising this and providing the right support, we can help children feel more comfortable, confident and engaged during meals.

Remember, the goal is participation, not stillness.

Click [here](#) for a handout on Movement before Mealtimes

