

Queensmill School

Mealtimes Policy

Introduction

At Queensmill we are aware that our students often find eating a stressful time. Children and young people with Autism have a number of difficulties which impact on their ability to access mealtimes. These include:

- Prolonged and extreme neophobia (fear of anything new);
- Repetitive and ritualistic behaviour (desire for predictability and sameness);
- Processing style: local Vs global (difficulties making generalisations from preferred foods to other similar foods);
- Lack of social motivation/difficulties coping with social demands;
- Physiological factors:
 - Gastrointestinal issues;
 - Sensory processing difficulties;
 - Poor recognition of hunger;
- Psychological factors.

Aims

Our aim at Queensmill is to make mealtimes and other activities involving food and drink as stress free as possible. Alongside this, we support our students to accept a wider range of foods, develop their independence with eating and drinking related skills (for example sitting at the table, requesting preferred foods, using cutlery and cups, setting and clearing the table) and learn about healthy eating.

During lunchtime we teach children to: sit, listen, interact with others, take turns, share, tolerate others, tolerate foods, try different foods, follow instructions, interact with their peers, learn the conventions of eating, lay a table, improve and develop basic maths skills, improve and develop communications skills, improve and develop self-help skills such as clearing away their plates, relax and enjoy the experience of eating with others as much as they can.

Implementation

Due to the complex nature of eating and drinking difficulties in children with Autism, the following structures are in place to ensure achievement of our aims.

- In-house Occupational Therapists have specialist training in feeding disorders; monitor research and attend relevant special interest groups, meetings and conferences to ensure knowledge and practice is current and evidence-based.
- All Queensmill School staff have received training in 'Selective Eating/Drinking in Children with ASD' run by the Occupational Therapy Department. This training is part of the induction package for new staff.
- Staff liaise with parents/carers to ensure that they are aware of each child's likes and dislikes, mealtime routines and if any special diets are followed (i.e. gluten free).
- Any food allergies are discussed with the parents and school nurse and a protocol is written by the school nurse. A board is on display for staff indicating which students are on special diets.
- Students can have either a packed lunch or a hot school dinner. School dinners are prepared freshly onsite in the school kitchen.
- Special diets are catered for in liaison with the school. Fresh fruit is always offered at lunchtime.
- Whilst the school recognises the need for healthy eating and adopts the healthy eating programme we also take into consideration the sensory needs of our students regarding foods and make allowances for these with the foods offered.
- Students have opportunities to choose their own foods at lunchtimes. The relevant Picture Exchange Communication System symbols, photographs, choose boards and ProLoQuo2Go symbols are prepared to support this.
- Our on-site Speech and Language Therapists are involved in lunchtimes and snack times in order to support staff in helping children to communicate their needs and preferences.
- Demands are adjusted for individual students at mealtimes as appropriate. For example, if food is not motivating for a student they may find it easier to choose by looking at the food and pointing rather than using other means of communication.
- Any interactions with food are carried out in a positive environment and food is not used as a negative consequence; i.e. food will not be forced upon students or taken away as a consequence of behaviour.

- New foods are slowly introduced to students by allowing them to touch, taste and smell them in their own time. When introducing new foods, considerations are made regarding the taste, texture and colour of the food.
- Transactional supports including social stories, staff modelling mini schedules, visual instructions, motivators and rewards are used to reinforce expectations, support and reward success at mealtimes.
- Portion sizes and numbers are consistent and reinforced by visuals or timers as needed to support students who have difficulties with finishing mealtimes.
- Priority goals are identified for individual students at mealtimes based on their needs. For example, a student may work on tolerating sitting with the group at mealtimes but may focus on developing their tolerance of foods during other sessions (snack or cooking).
- Whilst staff always encourages the use of cutlery the school also strongly acknowledges the need for students to explore food with all of their senses and this includes using hands to touch and eat some foods.
- Wherever possible staff eats with the students to model appropriate eating and make mealtimes more relaxed.
- Water is offered freely to the students and they can help themselves and drink as much water as they want.
- Sensory strategies and equipment are in place to help students to achieve a calm-alert state in the dining room (for example alternative seating, break cards, ear defenders).
- We use the National Curriculum and PSHCE (Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education) as a framework for teaching children about food and its preparation and other linked issues, and IEPs or individual targets for issues particular to that child.
- All students are exposed to food, drink and mealtime props on a regular basis to support familiarity and reduce anxiety. Opportunities for this include messy play sessions with food; water play with jugs, cups and straws; cooking sessions in class or Design & Technology room; work experience opportunities in the kitchen; mealtime role-play using dolls and play kitchens/foods; exposure to new foods during Religious Education, Modern Languages weeks and other celebrations; visiting local cafes, shops and markets; reading books, looking at pictures and watching videos about food and mealtimes.
- Queensmill school staff liaise closely with parents, the school nurse and other external professionals (for example dietitians or multi-disciplinary behavioural feeding team) to monitor and support students whose eating or drinking is a concern. Where appropriate,

food or drink intake and weight is monitored; mealtime behaviours and environments are assessed and goals and intervention strategies are set and reviewed regularly.

Reviewed Summer 2014: SMT

Policy reviewed – Oct 2017

Reviewed by *F Adu*.....

Date for next review – October 2018