



# CHILDHOOD NEURODIVERSITY

UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING EATING DIFFICULTIES

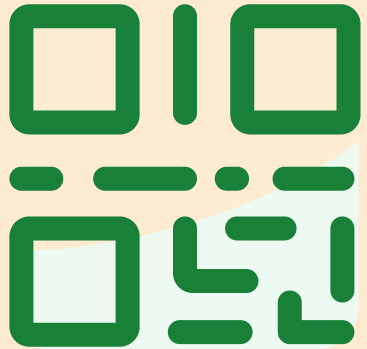
Psychology in Schools Team

Eating Disorders Team

Norfolk Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

June 2025

# slido



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#4021508**

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## CONFIDENTIALITY AND PERSONAL INFORMATION

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Slido will be used as our main interaction tool. We will not be able to use the Q&A function or answer raised hands.

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Our workshops are recorded and uploaded to YouTube, please be aware that anything shared on Slido may be included in a publicly accessible recording.

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**How old is your child(ren)?**

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**Where do you live?**

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# What Stage are you at?

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**What Presentation are you interested in today?**

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**How would you rate your current understanding of eating difficulties in neurodivergent children?**

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**How would you rate your current confidence supporting your child with eating difficulties?**

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# CHILDHOOD NEURODIVERSITY

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Psychology in Schools Team

Eating Disorders Team

NSFT

June 2025

# Today's workshop

Biology And Early Childhood

Sense Of Control

Lack Of Interest In Food/Hyperactivity

Sensory Avoidance

Concern About Consequences

## *What we aren't covering*

- *Eating disorders*
- *Body image related eating difficulties*
- *Family and relationship influences*

[Supporting our children with eating difficulties - YouTube](#)



## Looking after yourself

- Emotional topics being covered today
- Share what you feel comfortable to share
- Do what you need to look after yourself
- Recording and resources will be shared with everyone who signed up for the workshop

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# What is your relationship with food now as an adult?

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**what was your relationship with food as a child?**

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**What is it you are worried about with your child's eating?**

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**How does this affect you as a family?**

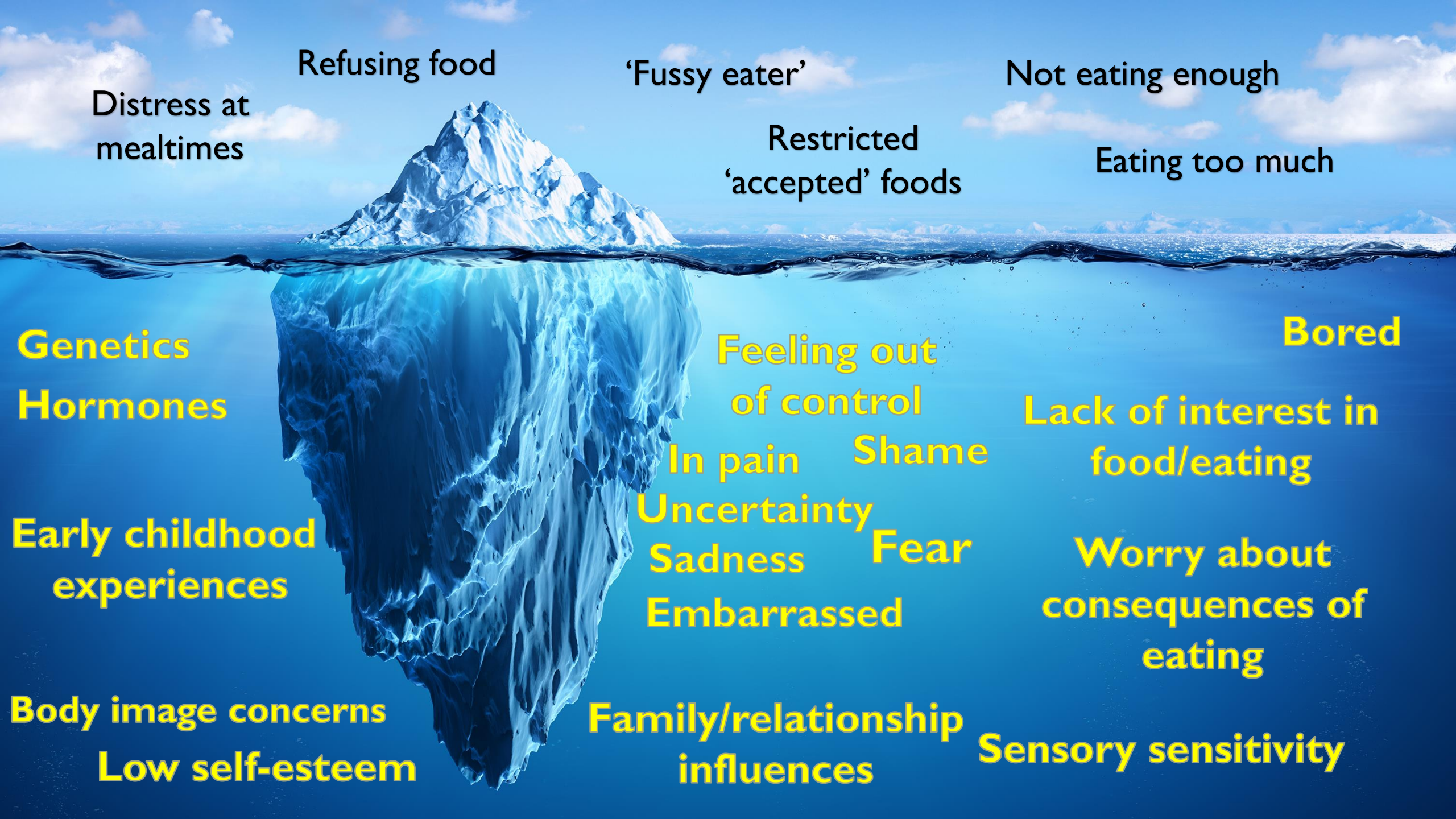
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## WHY MIGHT NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN STRUGGLE WITH EATING?

- The iceberg model
- Biology and hormones
- Sense of control
- Lack of interest in food/eating
- Sensory avoidance
- Concern about consequences





Distress at  
mealtimes

Refusing food

'Fussy eater'

Not eating enough

Restricted  
'accepted' foods

Eating too much

Genetics  
Hormones

Feeling out  
of control

Bored

Lack of interest in  
food/eating

Early childhood  
experiences

In pain    Shame  
Uncertainty  
Sadness    Fear  
Embarrassed

Worry about  
consequences of  
eating

Body image concerns  
Low self-esteem

Family/relationship  
influences

Sensory sensitivity





## BIOLOGY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

- Abnormalities in hormones involved in appetite control
- Role of interoception in noticing and responding to hunger
- Stress and anxiety impacts on our digestion and can cause stomach problems
- Disruptions to typical feeding development
  - Developmental delay
  - Significant illness or hospitalisation
  - Medical interventions such as surgery
  - Allergies and intolerances

## SENSE OF CONTROL

- When the world feels out of control or anxiety provoking, may try to establish a sense of control over food
- Support for underlying overwhelming feelings such as anxiety may be helpful

[Childhood Neurodiversity: Supporting your child with anxiety](#)





## COMMUNICATING A NEED

- Eating habits may be a way a child to communicate a need.
- Some examples:
  - Communicating distress that's difficult to verbalise
  - Regulating strong feelings (e.g. anxiety)
  - Feeling safe & shielded from demands & expectations
  - Accessing feelings of control
  - Bolstering esteem through feeling 'good' when restricting eating
  - May mirror negative self-image e.g. feeling unworthy or undeserving
  - Sensory differences



## CHANGING THE BEHAVIOUR OF OTHERS

- Eating difficulties can draw people closer.
- Evolutionary basis: Eating difficulties cause 'alarm bells' in communities.
- Children may learn that their eating habits influence the attention & caring behaviours of others.
- This exchange is likely an unconscious process.





## LACK OF INTEREST IN FOOD/EATING

- Easily distracted
- High arousal (focus on other things)
- Interoception Differences
- Low hunger drive
- High anxiety can suppress appetite
- Medication Side Effects



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# How high is your hunger drive?

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# SENSORY AVOIDANCE

- Avoidance based on sensory aspects of certain foods:
  - Temperature
  - Taste
  - Appearance
  - Smell
  - Texture
  - Noise
  - Brand specificity
- Aversive response to “oral surprise”

[Childhood Neurodiversity: Understanding and Supporting Sensory Needs](#)



# MANAGING CHALLENGES AROUND BRAND SPECIFICITY

- Empathise with your young person
- Gradual exposure may help with preparedness to change, e.g., you could introduce a new brand by involving you're young person
- Presentation- consider offering preferred brands differently, e.g., on a plate, bento box or in clear pot/bag so that the focus is not on the packaging. Once this is accepted, consider presenting one new brand in the same way, you could add a new brand alongside the preferred brand. Would they consider having a mix of brands? When they are ready, they may be able to make a complete switch, but this may take time.



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**Have you experienced any challenges with brand specificity?  
What challenges have you faced?**

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**How much would you have to be paid  
to eat a tarantula?**


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To some children, trying new or avoided foods can feel like an I'm A Celebrity trial!





## CONCERN ABOUT CONSEQUENCES

- Food 'neophobia'
- Specific fear of vomiting/  
choking/ discomfort
- Traumatic association



# THE FOOD-MOOD ROLLERCOASTER

- Our blood sugar levels affect our attention, irritability and energy levels
- Eating regularly throughout the day is important
- If your child is about to engage in a demanding activity, consider when they last ate



# SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD WITH EATING DIFFICULTIES

Developing a shared understanding

Getting the basics right

General advice – managing mealtimes, distress, language, learning plate

Strategies for managing specific difficulties

Red flags for eating disorders





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**What have you found helpful in supporting your child's eating?**

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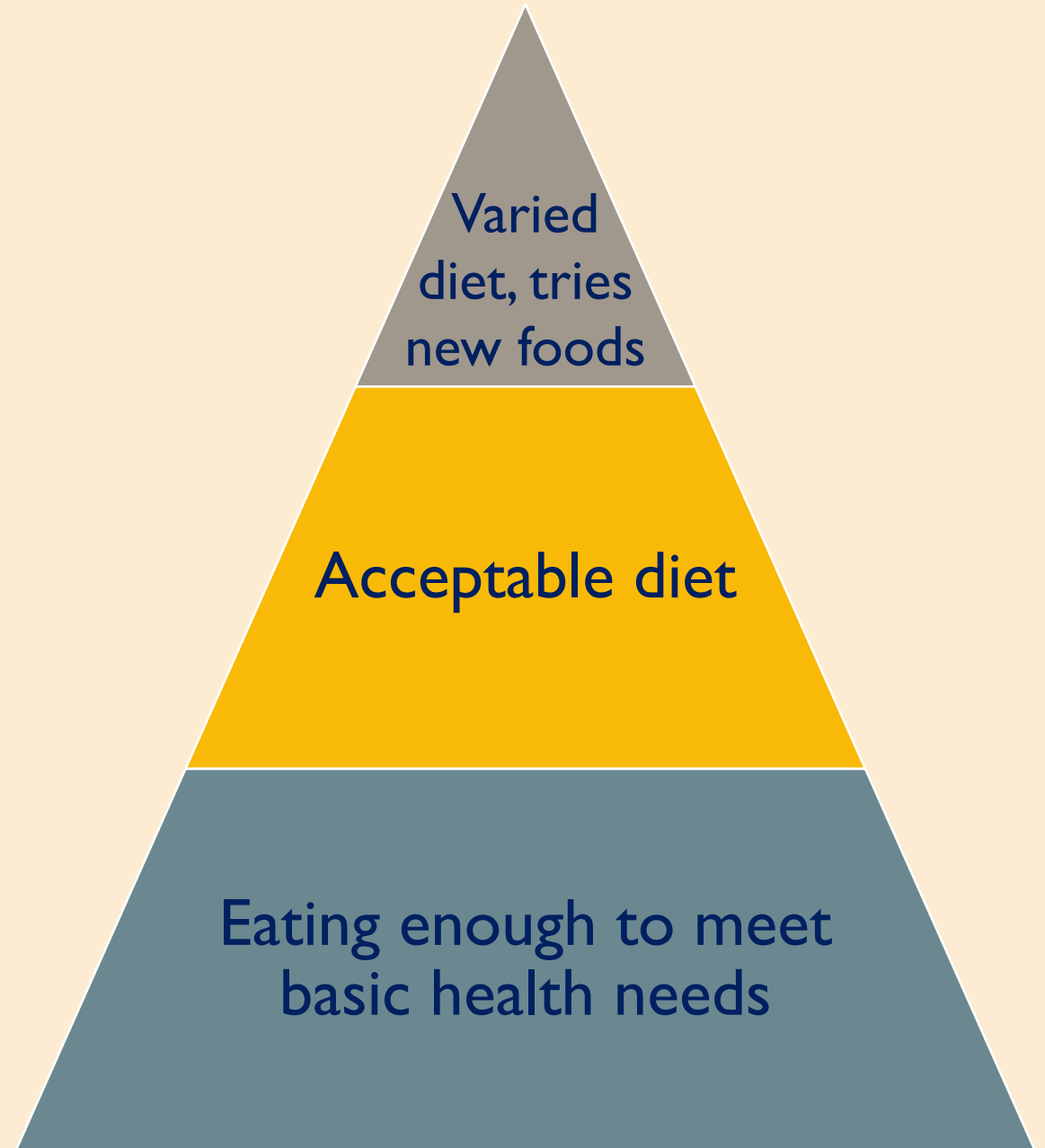
# DEVELOPING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

- Working out together what is under the surface of the iceberg
  - What is difficult?
  - Why is it difficult?
  - What is helpful?
  - What is not helpful?
- Strike while the iron is cold!



# GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT FIRST

- Before anything else, our priority is that our children are eating and drinking enough to grow and feel well
- Setting your 'non-negotiables', your family rules for meeting these basic needs are important
- Supporting meeting basic needs may require using supplements
- Remember the food-mood rollercoaster!



## Meeting kids' nutrition needs when fruit and veg is hard

- All fresh, frozen, tinned, dried, dehydrated, cooked or raw fruit and veg
- Dried fruit: raisins, dried strawberries, fruit and nut bars, fruit roll ups, yoghurt or chocolate covered fruit, banana or plantain chips
- Dried veggie 'crisps'
- Smoothies and 100% fruit juice: homemade or shop bought
- Raw veg: carrot sticks, baby toms, cucumber sticks, bell pepper sticks
- Sweet veg: sweet potato, butternut squash, carrots, parsnip
- Beany things: baked beans, hummus, falafel, lentils, tofu
- Saucy things: tomato sauce on pasta/pizza, spaghetti hoops/shapes in tomato sauce
- Vegetable soups like tomato soup  
(i.e. Heinz or store's own-brand equivalent)



# MANAGING MEALTIMES

- Use your shared understanding! Think together about what would make mealtimes easier
- Consider the sensory environment at mealtimes
- Prioritise being together as a family at mealtime – it's okay not to all eat the same thing!
- Availability of different foods in a low-stress environment
- Keeping conversation neutral
- Be aware of your own stress at mealtime



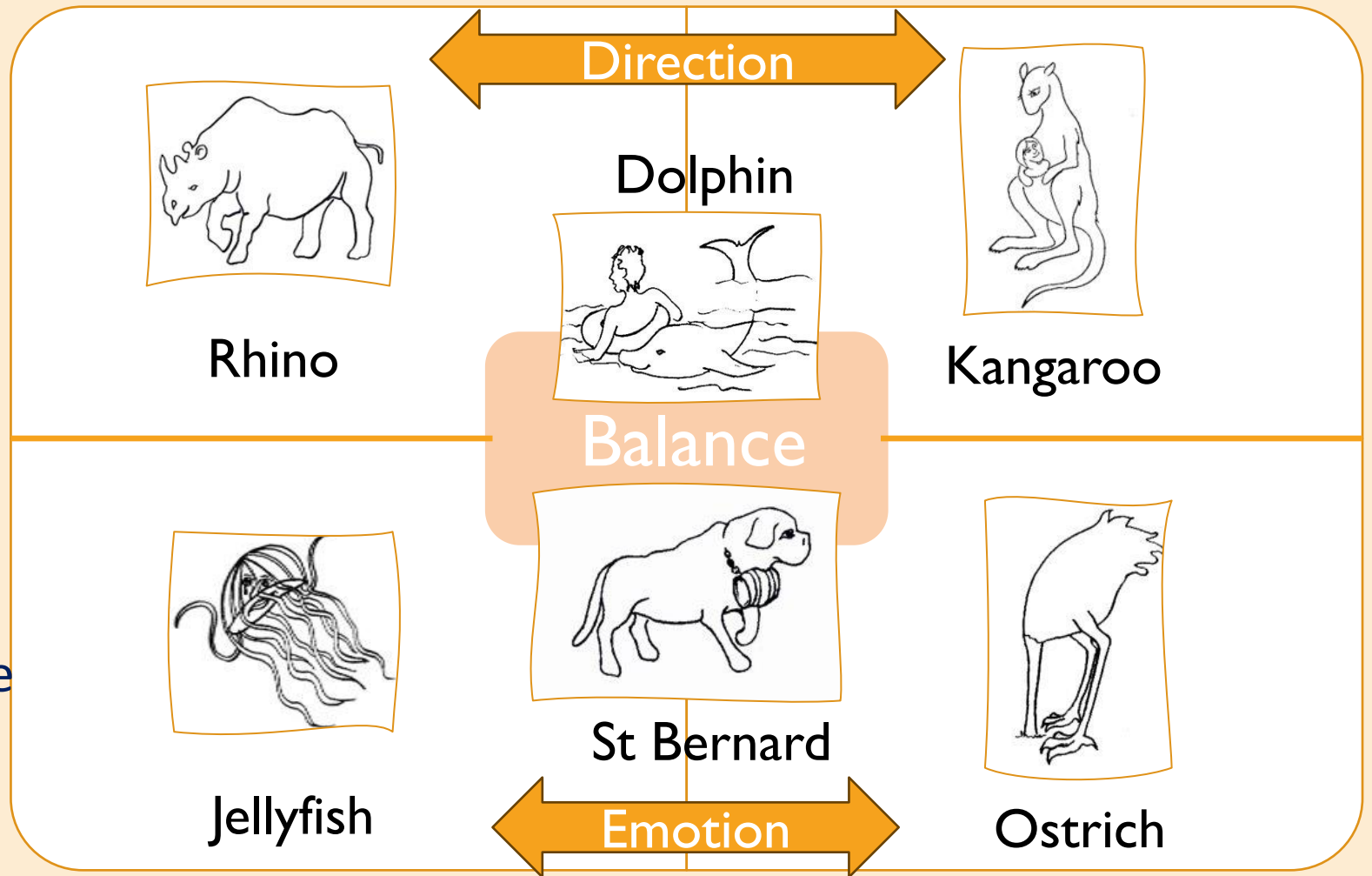
## SUPPORT STYLES

### BALANCING CONTROL

- Rhino: Too much control & direction
- Dolphin: Just enough subtle direction. 'Good Enough' caring
- Kangaroo: Too much sympathy & micro-management

### BALANCING EMOTION

- Jellyfish: Too much emotion, transparent emotional response
- St Bernard: Warmth, calmness & compassion
- Ostrich: Avoidance - too little emotion





# COPING WITH DISTRESS

- Being calm is important for our digestive system to work properly
- Breathing techniques e.g. finger or balloon breathing
- Grounding strategies e.g. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 senses, room search game
- Comfort objects



# THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

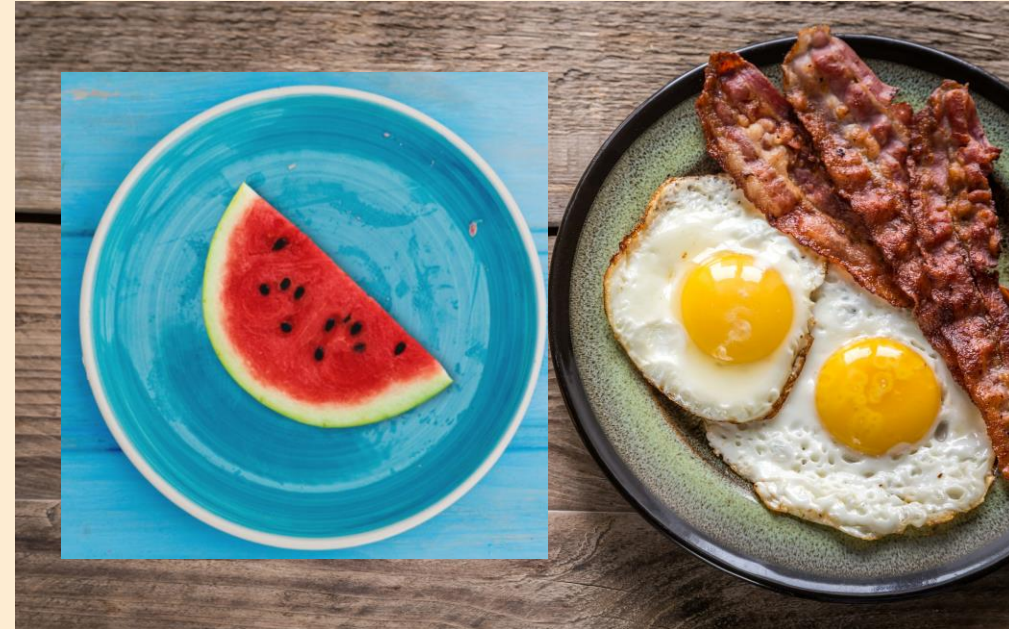
- Be careful not to 'demonise' foods or eating
- Celebrating bravery and achievements e.g. trying new foods
- Careful to balance praise with over-celebrating, which can increase pressure





# THE LEARNING PLATE

- Choose a plate that looks different from your child's usual plate.
- At mealtimes, have this learning plate ready to place food on for the child to explore. This should be the same plate each time.
- Alongside having their usual plate with their 'safe' foods, place some other food on the learning plate and place it near your child.
- Encourage your child to explore the food using all their senses – looking, touching, smelling etc but with no pressure to eat the food.



## Specific strategies: A sense of control

- Reducing uncertainty around food and eating
  - Eating schedule
  - Showing pictures of meals
  - Learning about cooking and food
- Giving a safe sense of control over food/mealtimes



# Specific strategies: Interest and hyperactivity



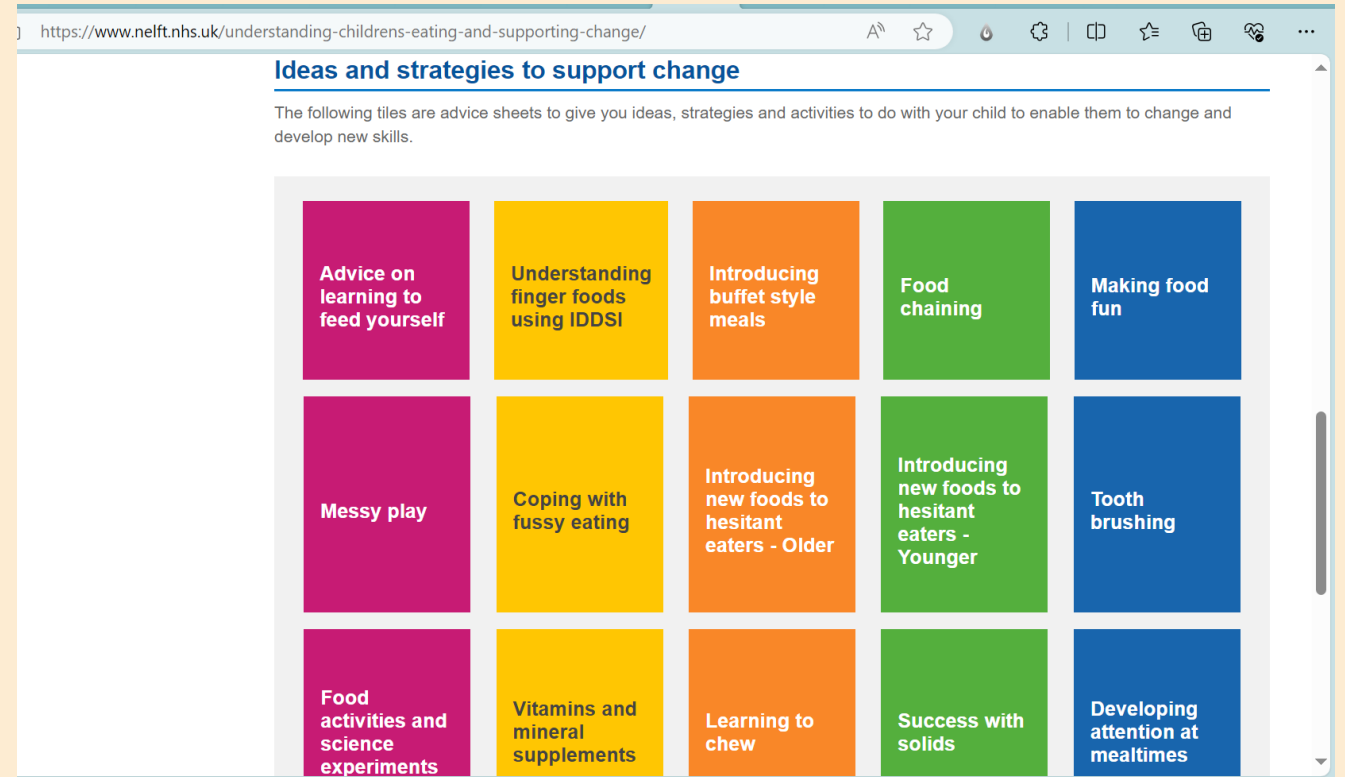
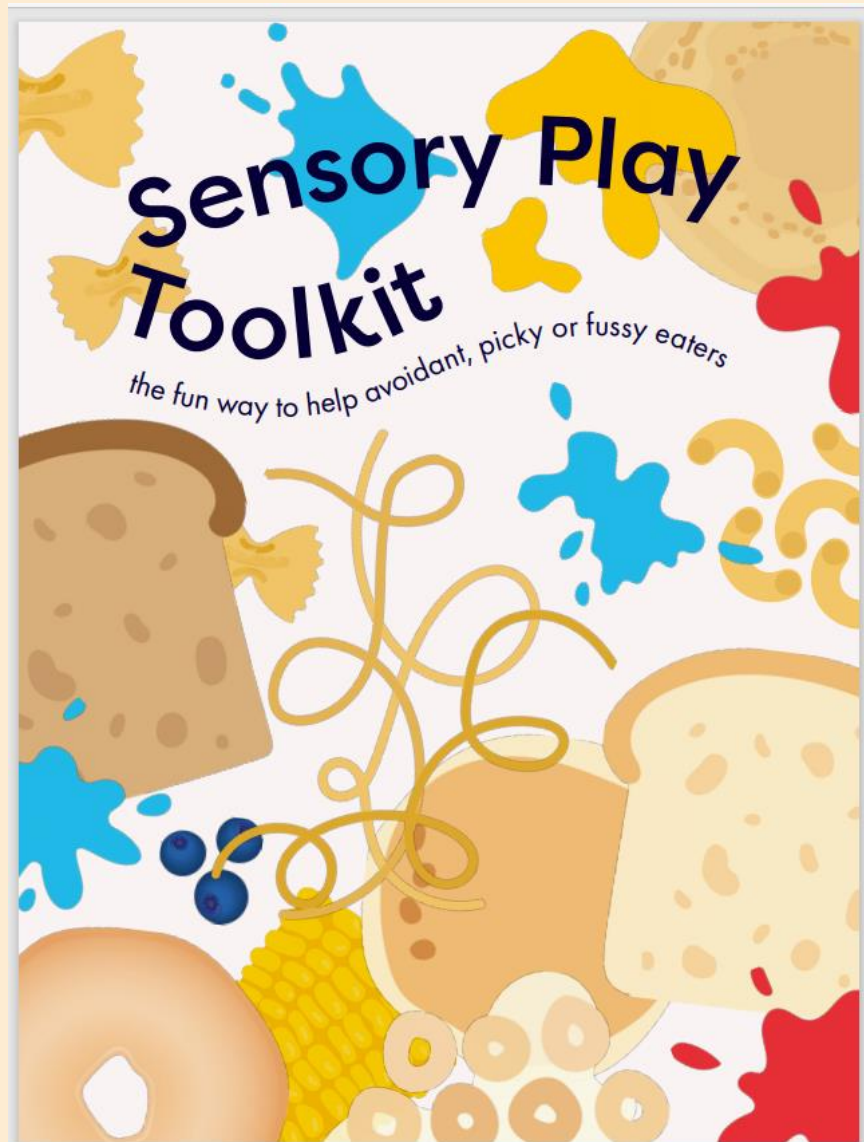
- Making food fun!
- Learning new things together
- Involving a special interest
- Working with hyperactivity



# Specific Strategies: Sensory Avoidance



- Use your shared understanding
- Adaptations to food to suit sensory preferences
- Adaptations to the environment to suit sensory preferences
- Increasing familiarity and comfort with sensory aspects of food – when they are calm!
  - Messy play
  - Helping prepare or clear away meals



[Understanding children's eating and supporting change | NELFT  
NHS Foundation Trust](https://www.nelft.nhs.uk/understanding-childrens-eating-and-supporting-change/)

[SENSORY PLAY TOOLKIT - Home\)](#)

# Specific strategies: Concern about consequences



- Understand the feared outcome
- Be thought detectives!
- You may want to seek support from local mental health services for significant anxieties e.g. sick phobia

# WORKING TOWARDS CHANGE

- Introducing change works best when done gradually, in small, manageable steps
- Create a goal together and a plan of increasing steps towards the goal
- Don't move on from a step until your child can do it comfortably!



## My pizza plan

A piece of dough



Dough with cheese on



Dough with tomato sauce



Dough with tomato sauce and cheese



A whole slice of pizza!



## EATING DISORDER RED FLAGS

### **Physical**

- Changes in weight
- Extreme lack of nutrition variation
- Exhaustion
- Feeling cold
- Dizziness/feeling faint
- Periods becoming irregular/stopping
- Nausea/vomiting
- Dental problems

### **Emotional/behavioural**

- Preoccupation with weight/food/dieting
- Extreme concern about body image
- Excessive exercising/activity
- New rituals around food (e.g., weighing, tearing into small pieces)
- Changes in diet, e.g., cutting out food groups, switching to low calorie foods
- Wanting to eat alone/avoiding eating with others
- Skipping meals
- Going to toilet after meals
- Missing food/discarded wrappers
- Controlling/anxious at mealtimes



‘Listen to your child. Help them manage their reactions. Throw lots of love at the whole thing.’

‘Embrace who your child is , let them be them, support and find ways to enable them to have the same outcome as everyone else’

# HOLDING HOPE

‘Listen to your child . Stop and take time to hear them. Evaluate what is their normal.’

‘Always validate there feelings.’

‘It's hard to understand how your child is feeling but try to keep calm & don't take it personally. Your child loves you & trusts you the most’

‘Keep being curious, become the detective and stay resilient. Be your child's Ambassador, give them a voice. Everyday is a learning day. Talk to Others and ask for support’



# RESOURCES

## Further resources

- [Understanding children's eating and supporting change | NELFT NHS Foundation Trust](#)
- [Food Sensitivities and Proclivities - Episode 6 'Autism, a parents guide' with Dr.Vicki Ford – ACAMH](#)
- [Fussy eaters - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](http://www.nhs.uk)
- [SENSORY PLAY TOOLKIT – Home](#)
- The Pines Highland Neurodevelopmental Service food and health webpage  
<https://www.thepineshighland.com/foodandhealth>
- For concerns about your child's weight or nutrition, contact their GP who may refer to specialist professionals
- Our workshop on body-image related eating difficulties [Supporting our children with eating difficulties - YouTube](#)

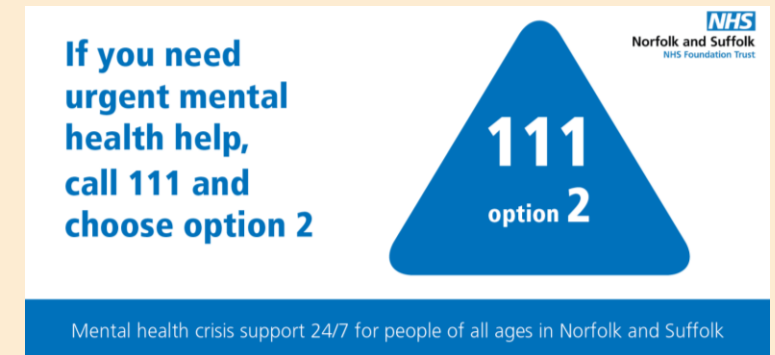
## Books

- *Food Refusal and Avoidant Eating in Children: a practical guide for parents and professionals.*  
Gillian Harris & Elizabeth Shea
- *How to Support Your Autistic Child with Food, Eating and Mealtimes: A practical Guide for Parents, Carers and Other Supporting Adults.*  
Pooky Knightsmith
- *Happy Families: Dr Beth Mosley\**

\*Disclosure: book royalties (*Happy Families*; Pan Macmillan) to Dr Beth Mosley

# KEY RESOURCES IF YOU ARE WORRIED ABOUT YOUR YOUNG PERSON

- **Young Minds parent helpline** 0808 802 5544 (9am -4.30pm M-F) and webchat service:  
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-helpline-and-webchat/>
- **111, option 2 crisis support**
- **Papyrus – Prevention of Young Suicide**  
[Papyrus UK Suicide Prevention | Prevention of Young Suicide \(papyrus-uk.org\)](https://www.papyrus-uk.org/)
- **Psychology in Schools Parent Workshop: Understanding Self Harm in Children/Adolescents**  
[Understanding Self-Harm in Children/Adolescents \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)





# PSYCHOLOGY IN SCHOOLS: FREE LIVE WORKSHOPS AND VIDEO RECORDINGS

Upcoming LIVE Parent/Carer workshops on mental health  
[www.nsft.uk/workshops](http://www.nsft.uk/workshops) Eventbrite



Childhood neurodivergence: free parent carer workshops

[Neurodiversity online parent/carers workshops - Suffolk SEND Local Offer](#)

Recorded previous mental health workshops on a range of topics:

- School Avoidance, Tics and Tourette's, Self-harm, Managing Behaviour, Social Media, OCD, Exam stress and more!

[www.nsft.nhs.uk/parent-workshops](http://www.nsft.nhs.uk/parent-workshops)



## PREVIOUS RECORDINGS IN THIS SERIES

**Childhood neurodiversity what you need to know as a parent/carer**

Watch here: [Childhood Neurodiversity: What You Need to Know as a Parent/Carer](#)

**Childhood neurodiversity: supporting social relationships**

Watch here: [Childhood Neurodiversity: Supporting Social Relationships](#)

**Childhood neurodiversity: supporting your child's education**

Watch here: [Childhood Neurodiversity: Supporting Your Child's Education](#)

**Childhood neurodiversity: supporting your child with anxiety**

Watch here: [Childhood Neurodiversity: Supporting your child with anxiety](#)

**Childhood Neurodiversity: Supporting Sleep Difficulties**

Watch here: [Childhood neurodiversity: Understanding and supporting sleep difficulties workshop](#)

**Childhood Neurodiversity: Parental Carer Stress**

Watch here: [Childhood Neurodivergence: Managing Parental/Carer Stress](#)

# Recovery College



## Recovery College

Open to all those interested in mental health recovery in Norfolk and Suffolk, the Recovery College provides free educational courses to equip you with the skills and strategies to move on with your recovery and/or to support others.

[Recovery College | Norfolk and Suffolk NHS](#)

## Discovery college

The Discovery College offers free educational online courses and webinars on mental health topics for 16 - 25 year olds. The courses and webinars are designed so that 16 - 25 year olds can become an expert in discovering themselves and their self care alongside others their age.

[Discovery College | Norfolk and Suffolk NHS](#)





# Local Parent Support

- <http://www.suffolklocaloffer.org.uk/>
- [PACT | Parents And Carers Together | Suffolk](#)
- [Suffolk Parent Carer Forum](#)
- [SUFFOLK SENDIASS https://suffolksendiass.co.uk/](https://suffolksendiass.co.uk/)
- [Suffolk Family Carers | Support for unpaid family carers](#)
- [Families Together Suffolk | Local Family Charity | Formerly Homestart Mid And West Suffolk](#)

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**I have found today's workshop helpful**

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**Two key things I will take away from this workshop are...**

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**How would you rate your understanding of eating difficulties in neurodivergent children?**

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**How would you rate your confidence in supporting your child with eating difficulties?**

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**One thing to improve this workshop would be...**

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# Childhood Neurodiversity: Supporting Eating Difficulties LIV

FEEDBACK SURVEY

<https://forms.office.com/e/4ud7GcUpR2>

