Tips to support a child with ARFID

Before attempting to increase any child's food range, the first and most important consideration is to allow them their preferred and safe foods. This will help to maintain weight and growth.

The second most important consideration is the person's vitamin and minerals intake, children and young people with ARFID are at an increased risk of malnutrition and deficiencies. Malnutrition does not always present itself as weight loss, although a child with ARFID might lose weight or have low weight, this is not always the case and should not be relied upon as an indicator of malnutrition. It is recommended to seek support from a nutritionist or dietician, they should be able to identify any deficiencies and provide the necessary supplements or vitamins. Your GP should be able to make a referral to a dietician and should be able to check your child's blood pressure, heart rate and temperature, all of which would highlight any causes for concern.

- Safe foods. These should not be messed with, e.g. hiding and disguising new foods into the safe foods. Children can be more likely to refuse a known food if it differs at subsequent presentations. Also attempting to increase your child's calorie intake by adding calories to the cooking of safe foods such as oils can result in the loss of safe food. Have safe food readily available and stocked up.

- New foods. When introducing new foods, do not take away or reduce any safe foods to make way for the new foods. Also, do not give a whole portion of a new food to try - start off with one piece. Practicing new food exposures should not be done at mealtimes. One of the reasons for this is because new foods may increase anxiety which produces adrenaline and adrenaline suppresses the appetite. Consider leaving new food in other areas of the house such as on the bench or table with no mention of them being there as this eliminates pressure.

- Sensory. Consider the sensory needs of your child at mealtimes. Think about the smells, the seating arrangement and noise, for example.

- Prepare and involve. It is important to prepare your child for any new foods as surprises can be a trigger for further anxiety around food. Involve your child in the process of picking what new foods they would like to try and when.

- Praise. Praise should not be focused on food or eating, this is because praise may be interpreted by the person as a demand or pressure and therefore have the opposite effect. Praising or rewarding your child's efforts can be more helpful.

- Manage your expectations. Count the small achievements as well as the big ones. Being in the presence of a new food or picking a new food up is still progress that should be acknowledged and encouraged. Manage your expectations and be realistic; it can take time, and baby steps will be more effective.

- Manage your own anxiety. You are not to blame for worrying as you are dealing with a stressful situation, but your child may feel your anxiety. Try to stay as relaxed and calm as possible.

- Trying foods again. It can take up to 10 tastes of a new food before gaining a preference for it. Managed repetition can support the acceptance of a new food.

- Building trust. Swapping food packets, for example, can damage trust and result in a loss of safe foods.

- Mealtime routines. Predictability at mealtimes can help; for example, eating at similar times, in the same environment or using familiar utensils.

- Consider the environment. Avoid changing too many things at once in the environment that your child eats in. Also do not force your child to sit with others to eat, e.g. at the dining table. Even if your child is not eating, watching others eat can be distressing.

- Model eating. Try new foods alongside your child to demonstrate that you eat it too and it is safe.

- Calm. Practicing some breathing or calming techniques with your child before/after mealtimes can be helpful.

Recommended resources

CNTW ARFID resource library

https://www.cntw.nhs.uk/resource-library/support-for-avoidant-restrictive-food-intake-disorder-arfid/

ARFID Awareness UK

https://www.arfidawarenessuk.org/

Beat eating disorders

https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/

Online peer support groups

Teesside ARFID Parent and Carer support group
https://www.facebook.com/groups/980929022754274/?ref=share_group_link

ARFID Support for Parents and Carers in the UK / Ireland
https://www.facebook.com/groups/no1.arfid.uk.parents.carers

Beat: Hummingbird Online ARFID Support Group
https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/get-information-and-support/get-help-for-myself/i-need-support-now/online-support-groups/arfid-support-group/

Beat: Endeavour - ARFID Carer Support Group https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/get-information-and-support/support-someone-else/endeavour-arfid-carer-support-group/?utm_source=CRM&utm_medium=Blog&utm_campaign=Services_Blogs

Owl Blue ARFID Friends Facebook Support Group
https://www.facebook.com/groups/501958061795269/?ref=share

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