

Meal Rotation & Picky-Eating Playbook

A 10-day meal rotation you repeat across the month, plus the full food-chaining ladder for selective eaters — so mealtime planning stops being a daily decision.

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Used on Days 2, 4, 12, 20, 26



THE FORMULA BEHIND EVERY MEAL

Protein + vegetable or fruit + healthy carbohydrate + healthy fat

There is no single "autism diet" — current national guidance specifically advises against exclusion diets to manage autism's core features^[4], and restrictive eating already common in autistic children makes cutting further food groups risky without a diagnosed reason^[14]. This rotation is deliberately built from a wide, ordinary pantry — swap freely for what's actually in your kitchen.



A NOTE ON THE ICONS BELOW

Every meal is illustrated rather than photographed — that's a deliberate choice, the same one used throughout this system, so nothing here depends on a photo of food that doesn't look quite like yours. Swap any single ingredient freely; the icon just marks which meal of the day it is.

The first 5 days

1 DAY 1



BREAKFAST

Eggs + avocado + toast



LUNCH

Chicken + rice + broccoli



DINNER

Beans + plantain + avocado

2 DAY 2



BREAKFAST

Oats + peanut butter + banana



LUNCH

Beans + garri + spinach



DINNER

Fish + sweet potato + green beans

3 DAY 3



BREAKFAST

Yogurt + berries + oats



LUNCH

Turkey meatballs + pasta + tomato sauce



DINNER

Jollof rice + chicken + vegetables

4 DAY 4



BREAKFAST

Beans + boiled egg + plantain



LUNCH

Lentils + rice + carrots



DINNER

Beef stew + yam + spinach

5

DAY 5



BREAKFAST

Smoothie: yogurt + berries + banana + oats



LUNCH

Chicken + sweet potato + peas



DINNER

Moi-moi + fruit + vegetables

The second 5 days

6 DAY 6



BREAKFAST Sweet potato + eggs + avocado



LUNCH Egusi or vegetable soup + rice



DINNER Fish + rice + cucumber

7 DAY 7



BREAKFAST Eggs + spinach + cheese wrap



LUNCH Chickpeas + quinoa + peppers



DINNER Chicken + plantain + green beans

8 DAY 8



BREAKFAST Oats + chia + banana + milk



LUNCH Beef + rice + mixed vegetables



DINNER Beans + rice + avocado

9 DAY 9



BREAKFAST Yogurt bowl + fruit



LUNCH Fish + yam + vegetables



DINNER Turkey + potatoes + peppers

10 DAY 10



BREAKFAST Beans + egg + bread



LUNCH Chicken + brown rice + spinach



DINNER Lentil stew + rice + carrots



THEN WHAT?

Repeat Days 1–10 for Days 11–20 and 21–30. You can swap any single ingredient for a preferred equivalent (e.g., garri → rice, beef → turkey) without breaking the formula – the goal is a rhythm you can sustain, not a rigid script.

Understanding food chaining, simply

Think of it like teaching a child to swim — nobody starts in the deep end.

Food chaining introduces a new food in small steps linked to what a child already accepts, rather than a jump to something completely unfamiliar ^[15]. The goal at every step is **tolerance**, not **performance** — your child does not need to eat anything today. They only need to move one small step further than yesterday.

A RELATABLE WAY TO PICTURE IT — LAGOS OR HOUSTON, SAME IDEA

Imagine your child already eats plain white rice happily. Food chaining doesn't jump to broccoli. It moves to rice with one grain of chopped carrot mixed in — something almost identical, one small step away. Once that's accepted without a fight, the next link in the chain moves a little further: maybe jollof rice, or rice with a visible (but not required) piece of vegetable on the side.

Repeated, low-pressure exposure matters more than any single meal: research on early food acceptance suggests real gains after roughly 8-15 tries with the same food ^[13]. If your child rejects a food twelve times and accepts it on the thirteenth, that isn't a coincidence — that's the process working exactly as expected.

From "it's on the table" to "they ate it"

Each rung below is a genuine win on its own. Many children spend several days — sometimes longer — on a single rung before moving to the next, and that is completely normal.

1

Tolerate

The food is on the plate or table, somewhere in view. There is no expectation to touch it, look at it, or acknowledge it at all.

Example: a small piece of avocado sits on the corner of the plate next to the chicken and rice your child already eats. Nobody mentions it.

2

Touch

Your child touches the food with a hand, fork, or spoon — still with no expectation to eat it. Pushing it around the plate counts.

Example: "Can you move the avocado to the other side of your plate for me?" is a touch-rung request, not an eating one.

3

Smell

Your child brings the food close enough to smell it, entirely on their own terms and timing.

Example: holding the avocado near their nose for one second before putting it straight back down is a full smell-rung success.

4

Taste

A lick, or the smallest possible taste on the tip of the tongue. Celebrate this rung as fully as you would a whole plate finished.

Example: "You tasted it! That was brave" — said the same way whether they swallowed it or spat it straight back out.

5

Eat

A genuine bite, chewed and swallowed. This may take many rounds through rungs 1-4 first — and that's the process working, not failing.

Sources for this guide: [4] NICE CG170 · [13] Optimising Repeated Exposure (2021) · [14] Feeding Behaviours in Families Systematic Review (2025) · [15] Caregiver-Implemented Feeding Interventions Systematic Review (2023). Full list of 19 references in Document 0 – Start Here.

● YOUR PRACTICE LIST

20 foods to rotate through the ladder

Pick one at a time. There's no order that matters more than another.

Avocado · Banana · Boiled egg · Roasted carrots · Cucumber sticks · Plain yogurt · Oats · Sweet potato · Black-eyed beans · Berries · Orange segments · Roasted chickpeas · Spinach (blended into a smoothie first if needed) · Broccoli (roasted, not boiled, for texture) · Plantain · Apple slices · Hummus · Shredded chicken · Rice · Pear

A tip that changes outcomes more than people expect: **texture matters as much as the food itself**. A child who rejects soft, boiled carrots may happily accept the same carrot roasted until slightly crisp, or raw as a stick. If a food fails on the ladder, try it again later in a different form before crossing it off.

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Your food-chaining tracking chart

Mark the highest rung reached for each food — progress, not perfection.

FOOD	TOLERATE	TOUCH	SMELL	TASTE	EAT



CONSTIPATION IS COMMON — AND USUALLY TREATABLE AT HOME

Gastrointestinal symptoms including constipation appear in roughly a third to half of autistic children in pooled research^[9]. Pears, prunes, kiwi, berries, oats, beans and water are first-line home tools; escalate to your pediatrician if it becomes chronic, painful, or involves blood or stool-withholding.

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Your grocery list

Organized by section, so you can shop the whole rotation in one trip.



PROTEIN

Eggs, chicken, beef,
turkey, fish, beans, lentils,
chickpeas, yogurt, cheese



CARBS & PRODUCE

Rice, oats, sweet potato,
yam, plantain, garri,
quinoa, bread, pasta



VEG, FRUIT & FATS

Spinach, carrots, broccoli,
peppers, berries, banana,
avocado, olive oil

Tip: this list covers the full 10-day rotation. Buying it all in one trip, then repeating the same list every 10 days, removes a second daily decision from your week – not just what to cook, but what to buy.