FEEDING essential CHECKLIST

Step 1: Uncover the Root Causes of Selective Eating

For a child with autism, selective eating is almost always driven by unique sensory processing profiles or subtle oral-motor physical challenges, rather than deliberate stubbornness.

- ☐ **Acknowledge sensory overload:** Recognize that a single unexpected texture, temperature, or smell can trigger an immediate, protective fight-or-flight response in your child's nervous system.
- ☐ **Observe physical comfort:** Notice if your child struggles to chew or swallow certain textures (like fibrous meats or raw vegetables), which can point to underlying jaw or tongue coordination difficulties.
- ☐ **Remove behavioral blame:** Remind yourself that restricting food choices to a small selection of "safe," predictable items is your child's way of seeking safety, not being difficult.
- ☐ **Seek a professional assessment:** Work with our clinical teams to isolate whether a food aversion is rooted in sensory over-stimulation or a physical motor delay so you can tailor your approach exactly to their needs.

Step 2: Balance Blood Sugar to Reduce Behavioral Meltdowns

The food your child eats directly influences their daily attention spans and behavioural comfort by keeping their internal biology stable.

- ☐ **Eliminate high-sugar triggers:** Swap out carbonated, high-sugar sodas and high-fructose juices for pure water infused with natural fruit slices or sensory-friendly herbal teas.
- ☐ **Prioritize whole-food pairings:** Serve snacks that pair a complex carbohydrate with a clean protein source (such as apple slices with seed butter) to slow down glucose absorption and protect against energy crashes.
- ☐ **Track patterns carefully:** Keep a simple food-and-behavior log for two weeks to identify if specific artificial food colorings or pre-packaged snacks correspond to heightened states of irritability or anxiety.
- ☐ **Provide sustained energy:** Shift the family kitchen away from rapid-release carbohydrates to give your child the baseline physical calm they need to navigate daily transitions smoothly.

Step 3: Heal the Gut to Support Emotional Regulation

Physical pain is directly tied to behavioural expression. Because communication differences can make it hard for a child with autism to verbally explain internal discomfort, gastrointestinal distress often presents as sudden agitation or withdrawal.

- ☐ **Watch for silent signs of pain:** Track indicators of chronic constipation, severe bloating, acid reflux, or chronic diarrhea, which are highly prevalent among children with autism.
- ☐ **Explore sensitivity testing:** Partner with a licensed healthcare specialist to complete formal allergy and food sensitivity testing.
- ☐ **Introduce gut-supporting choices:** Implement clean, gentle whole foods to directly mitigate painful physiological symptoms.
- ☐ **Create space for engagement:** Alleviate underlying physical discomfort so your child has the stamina and emotional comfort to participate joyfully in therapy and collaborative play.

Step 4: Navigate Sensory Textures with Low-Pressure Steps

Forcing sudden changes at mealtime can break down trust and increase anxiety. Instead, use systematic desensitization to help your child interact with new items at their own comfort level.

- ☐ **Provide visual exposure:** Place a microscopic piece of a new food on the very edge of the plate with absolutely zero requirement for your child to taste it, letting them normalize its presence.
- ☐ **Encourage tactile interaction:** Invite your child to touch the food with their fingers, smell it, or kiss it over several separate meals to build familiarity without pressure.
- ☐ **Modify texture presentations:** Alter how a whole food looks to match their preferred textures - such as pureeing a vegetable into a smooth, familiar sauce or baking fruit into a uniform crisp.
- ☐ **Use discreet nutritional boosts:** Incorporate high-quality, unflavored plant-based alternatives like finely ground chia seeds or flaxseed meal into trusted foods like morning oatmeal or blended smoothies.

Step 5: Adjust Evening Nutrition for Restful Family Sleep

Sleep disruptions create a compounding cycle where a sleepless night guarantees lower frustration tolerance and heightened sensory sensitivity the following day. Optimizing evening snacks supports the body's natural synthesis of sleep-regulating hormones.

- ☐ **Clear out evening stimulants:** Enforce the absolute removal of caffeine and high-fructose food or drink items from your child's evening routine.
- ☐ **Introduce tryptophan-rich foods:** Incorporate light evening snacks rich in amino acids - such as specific dairy or protein options - to help the body naturally create serotonin and melatonin.
- ☐ **Track sleep architecture changes:** Monitor how variations in the timing of evening snacks alter your child's ability to settle into a deep, restful state.
- ☐ **Build waking stamina:** Aim for a solid, deep nine to ten hours of sleep each night to give your child a stabilized mood and a significantly higher capacity for self-regulation during the day

There is a place for you and your child here. By introducing these gentle, structured shifts, you are actively moving away from mealtime chaos and taking back a meaningful, restorative sense of agency over your household health. Whenever the journey feels heavy, remember that Monarch House is right here to offer guidance, celebrate your small victories, and help you build a peaceful table where everyone belongs.