

family

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Abstract

This group of articles describes practices which are not devaluing when assisting people with high support needs to manage their meals. **Keyword: Individualisation**

EATING

FOR

ENJOYMENT

A framework for rethinking training and support in eating and drinking is needed before consumers can enjoy their meals, says Bill Puddicombe.

In the West where food is in plentiful supply to a majority of the population, eating and drinking impinges on all areas of life. Most obviously, it is part of our basic need for subsistence. A balanced diet and regular chances to eat are essential to meet the demands of life in this society.

Particular categories of eating and drinking also have strong significance. The way we understand phrases like 'Sunday dinner', 'cheese and wine', 'tea party' illustrates that the consumption of food is often a pretext for, or an accompaniment to, social contact, acquaintance-making and gatherings of many kinds.

Food is a leisure pursuit for many people. Preparing and eating food of varying kinds can be of great interest and delight. An evening at a restaurant is considered as a similar kind of experience to seeing a film or play. Most obvious is the social use of alcohol.

The snack is omnipresent, being continually advertised on TV and in the High Street. Eating is not confined to meal times. We are assailed with temptations to nibble crisps or biscuits, to fancy a chocolate bar or fill ourselves with fizz.

Pleasure

People with special needs have been deprived of such ordinary skills and pleasures. What is needed is a framework for rethinking practices for training and support in the areas of eating and drinking.

It would be useless to list devaluing practices. It is more practical to note an underlying attitude which needs to be recognised, examined and jettisoned. Its root can be discovered in the word feeding, as in feeding programme, you feed her . . . and so on. Even in enlightened services, this word is used to describe relationships between consumers and assistants. It evokes an idea of servicing or fuelling the person eating. It ignores the part that their actions should have in eating and suggests that the consumer is having something done to them.

The word feeding is a negation of the social aspect of food and drink. Whereas we can see eating as an important part of social life, feeding is a non-ordinary image. It means eating for subsistence value only.

If we place people in a situation where their food experiences roughly correspond to 'toileting'; where meal times are arranged conveniently for other people, where they are denied snacks because they would dirty their clothes, they are deprived of a part of

that she finds them more pleasant. You are at an advantage here. You know there is a better method of eating. From this one meal you can find ways to improve that person's experience.

A general principle we can apply to bring about positive change in this area consists of two elements: participation and control. Many people are not given a chance to actively participate in their own eating. For example, a consumer may find that she cannot get a spoonful of food to her mouth without spilling

of cutlery. It is important to take more time, energy and support when trying to help people to take control of their own eating. The 'shovel and stopwatch' technique can be sent to a museum.

The relationship between the consumer and their assistant is the hub around which the consumer's eating experience turns.

Eating is a social activity. It is important for an assistant to be communicative and friendly towards the consumer. This seems obvious but often this relationship seems to break down into a morose, automatic one. When breakdown happens then positive change occurs through rehumanising. Perhaps the assistant could eat her food with the consumer. She needs to constantly assess the human needs of the consumer and to communicate about the food and the eating process.

Consumers will constantly communicate about their food. It is essential to be alert for these signals. They contain consistent and obvious pieces of relevant communication, ie that it is very hot or very cold. If the consumer has had long experience of devaluing eating experiences, it may be that she may have stopped bothering to communicate, finding it has little effect. The assistant must demonstrate that any communication is heeded. This will encourage the consumer to communicate more of her feelings.

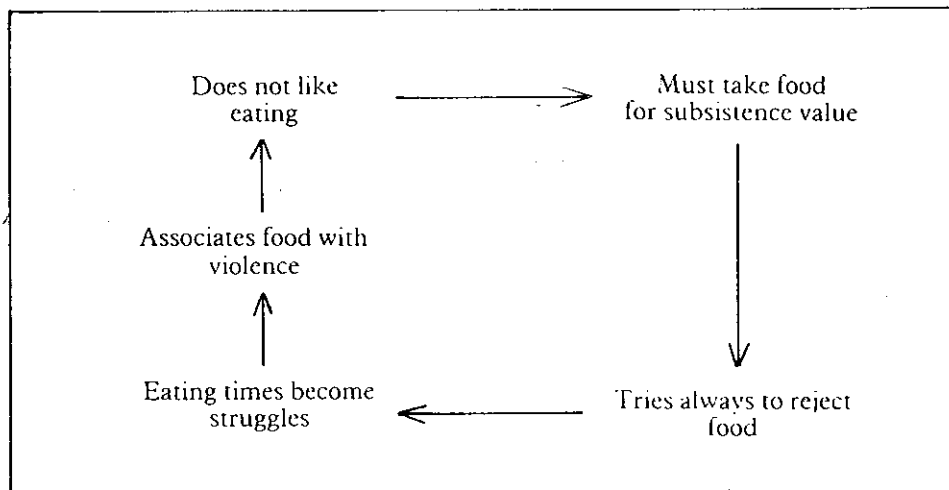


Figure 1: The vicious circle.

life which ordinary people find important. By removing the social aspect of food, we remove the natural enjoyment.

Consider a person you know who needs help with eating and who cannot control the terms of their eating. One day, eat the same meal as that person, in the same way. If necessary mask your sight or hearing to correspond to any sensory disabilities of the consumer.

Mashed

Ask your assistant to prepare the food the way the consumer's usually is, whether that be mashed in the middle of a bowl, liquidised in one go or whatever. Then ask your assistant to help you eat. Do not make any decisions during the eating process that the person you are considering is not allowed to. Try and make the meal last the same time as the consumer's usually do. This may mean eating cold food. Include in the meal whatever drink the consumer usually has, perhaps luke warm tea or luke warm orange squash. Ask your assistant to judge how much social contact is usually part of the relationship and of what kind and behave accordingly.

After this exercise you may be in a position to empathise with one person's food experiences. When you are judging this experience, try not to, even internally, indulge in 'yes buts'. For instance, do not assume that because the person you are trying to emulate has had many more experiences like yours

some or all of it. This is often used as a reason for 'feeding' a consumer. It is likely that with help she could still eat for herself. Perhaps a hand made available to steady hers, a block under her elbow or just some training is needed.

The advantages are obvious and it is an increase of control for the consumer. She can have more say in timing mouthfuls, even more chance to decide against eating parts (or even all) of the meal.

Some consumers are physically unable to take an active part in their own eating process but there are still ways in which they can be given more control. Communications about readiness for mouthfuls, textures and flavours should be carefully observed by the assistant. If the consumer does not have any formal skills of communications this will take skill, practice and encouragement from the assistant.

The principle then is to allow consumers to actively participate to the fullest extent possible in their own eating process. Control will then pass from assistant to consumer.

If a consumer has been fed for her whole life, active participation in eating may be difficult for her to handle. Two things need to be considered. First, the skills required may take a long time to acquire and perseverance may be needed. Second, there will be a few consumers who have no wish to change. For them no solution is needed.

Meals will take longer as people are allowed to take up their own control

"Many people are not given the chance to actively participate in their own eating"

Occasionally there is a person who never, or very rarely, wishes to eat. This person is locked into a vicious circle (Figure 1). The most likely reason is a consistent breakdown of the consumer/assistant relationship and a tendency in services to rely on limited time and controlled coercion to cover people's human needs.

I have seen 'feeding programmes' that include pulling people's hair to compel them to open their mouths as well as restraint of limbs. A more suitable course of action would be to try to provide the consumer with some reinforcing and human eating experiences. This requires time, patience, kindness and flexibility from the assistants and a selection of good food.

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FOOD PRESENTATION

The surroundings in which we eat and the way our food is presented is important in our appreciation. There are numerous ordinary things which are usually forgotten in an institutional setting — like a cruet and an option to drink while eating. Here are some ways to defeat devaluing practices in food and drink presentation.

Mush

If a consumer needs to have food cut up it is a widespread assumption that the food is mixed and mashed together in a tidy heap. This makes every meal similar in taste and texture, often compounded by drowning the already boring heap with gravy, Ketchup or the nearest available fluid.

To mix up a consumer's food constantly removes her ability to make choices about it. To hear that a consumer will eat anything is often a clear pointer that she is rarely in a position to identify a flavour or texture sufficiently to express dissatisfaction. If the assistant keeps flavours separate and identifiable, then a more sophisticated appreciation of food is possible for the consumer and some dialogue is likely to follow.

When a consumer has difficulty chewing and swallowing, the food is often mashed. This is likely to detract from enjoyment. It is usually possible to leave some texture. It is also important to give consumers regular chances to develop their eating skills so that eating food is a more 'natural' state.

Consumers with partial sight

If a consumer has partial sight, then an assistant may need to keep up a running commentary on the eating process. The content of the mouthful can be described and the process of loading cutlery explained. If the consumer is not holding her own cutlery, then it is important for her to know when each mouthful is coming. Eating times will be unpleasant if the first you know of each mouthful is a spoon smacking against your teeth.

If a consumer also has partial hearing, then a gentle touch in the mouth area is one way of warning when a mouthful is imminent.

Many problems faced by consumers are due to the low expectations of assistants. This may lead to consumers never being given the chance to develop their eating skills to the fullest extent. It may also lead to their never being given real ideas as to ordinary, social eating practices.

Drinks with food

Ordinary drinking with food takes many forms — a can of Coke and Mars bar, a glass of wine with dinner, the jug of water on the table. Often, devalued people are only offered tea or squash. This is often given as the consumer's 'third course' after the food has been eaten. It is usually administered in one or two draughts. This is easily remedied by making sure the drink is available all through the meal or snack so that it can be taken slowly in mouthfuls.

Social profile

Expectations of assistants can affect a consumer's development of social eating skills. If a consumer is left at a stage where she can eat independently but given no real idea of ordinary table manners, then she is open to unnecessary devaluing social experiences.

Variety

Similar situations arise in the qualities of food, such as bitterness and spicy flavours, and to the consumption of alcohol. The assumption that a consumer can only appreciate sweet and bland food because she has physical difficulties with eating, is illogical and yet very common.

It may be that a person does not enjoy hot, spicy food but is never given the chance to try, say, chilli con carne or a spicy Asian meal so there is no opportunity to develop such tastes. Similarly it is ordinary practice to explore various 'social' drinks from beer to egg flip to Cola.

We also change our tastes on the way through life. The most frequent piece of information to follow a person from service to service is 'dislikes salad'. How long ago was this judgement reached? Five years later the consumer may have changed her mind. To get an ordinary amount of pleasure out of eating, we need to have an ordinary range of opportunities to try, appreciate, enjoy or reject the enormous range of food and drink available to us.

Special equipment

A vast array of ingenious gadgets are marketed to assist people with physical disabilities to eat. These can be of enormous help in making eating more comfortable and/or independent. These gadgets have drawbacks, which have to be weighed up against their convenience. For instance, the sloped oval dishes, often used by people who use only one hand to eat, can be very useful, but people with limited manual dexterity may often end up with the meal squashed into a familiar, indeterminate mush at the end of the bowl. Gadgets are readily available in an institutional setting. This may mean that consumers who could progress to using ordinary utensils are never given the opportunity.

The liquidiser

The liquidiser can be valuable to the consumer who is really unable to chew and swallow food not thoroughly reduced. However, it can become the bane of someone's life. Roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and two veg liquidised will taste just the same as steak and kidney pie. Baby food is fine for babies. If foods are liquidised separately and not too finely, a meal or snack can still be an interesting one. Consumers can be given a regular chance to move away from liquidised food and to develop skills in chewing.

Heat

A consumer is offered a hot drink. What temperature is right? One response is to slosh half a pint of milk into cups of tea and coffee thus rendering them harmless but tasteless.

A constructive alternative is for the assistant to prepare herself a hot drink at the same time. When it is comfortable for her to drink it is likely to be comfortable also for the consumer.

Bill Puddicombe

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