

## **Play Your Way Past Picky Eating**

### **A Fun, Brain-Based Activity Book for Kids with Picky Eating or ARFID**

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#### **Who This Book Is For**

This book is for children who feel worried, uncomfortable, or downright freaked out by new foods — and for the caring adults who want to help without pressure, power struggles, or tears at the table.

If eating has started to feel stressful, limiting, or full of battles, you are in the right place. This book is not about forcing bites or “just trying harder.” It is about helping your child’s brain and body learn that food is safe, manageable, and even fun again.

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#### **How to Use This Book**

This is an interactive activity book designed to be completed by a child and an identified adult partner together.

You do not need to move through the activities perfectly or at a set pace. Some families will move quickly, others will repeat activities or linger in one section. That is not only okay — it is expected.

A few important guidelines:

- One adult partner should be involved consistently
- Curiosity matters more than bravery
- Play works better than pressure
- Progress happens through repetition, not big leaps

This book works best when it is approached as an adventure rather than a test.

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## **A Note to Parents**

If your child has a limited or restricted diet due to picky eating or ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder), this book is here to help.

ARFID is not just “fussy eating.” It is a true food aversion or food-related fear. Children with ARFID often experience intense anxiety around trying new foods, fear of swallowing or choking, strong disgust reactions to textures or smells, and a powerful urge to avoid unfamiliar foods altogether.

Picky eating driven by anxiety usually does not resolve on its own. Over time, avoidance tends to spread, meals become more stressful, and family life can start revolving around food battles or negotiations.

The good news is that change is possible.

This book uses a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and exposure-based approach that helps children retrain their brain’s alarm system around food. Instead of forcing eating, we focus on helping the brain learn — through repeated, playful experiences — that new foods are not dangerous.

By bringing curiosity, play, and joy into food experiences, your child can begin to shift from fear and restriction to flexibility and confidence.

This book will guide you and your child through a Bite-Sized Adventure made up of fun, engaging activities. These activities are designed to gently stretch your child’s comfort zone while helping their nervous system learn to calm down.

This process requires your child’s effort — and your steady, supportive partnership. You are not here to convince, pressure, or negotiate. You are here to coach, model, and walk alongside your child as they practice new skills.

With that, we wish you and your child a silly, messy, curiosity-filled Bite-Sized Adventure.

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### **Activity 1: Welcome to Your Bite-Sized Adventure**

#### **For You to Know**

This book will help you learn how to play your way past food fears and worries so you can become a Food Adventurer.

A Food Adventurer is not someone who loves every food. A Food Adventurer is someone who is curious, brave enough to explore, and willing to practice—even when things feel a little uncomfortable.

You will not be doing this alone. Every great adventurer has a partner, and yours will help coach you as you practice training your Food Guard Dog.

#### **For You to Do**

It's time to choose your adult partner.

This should be a grown-up who:

- Makes you feel safe
- Can stay calm even when things feel tricky
- Is willing to practice alongside you

Write or draw your adult partner's name here:

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#### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Why did you choose this person to join you on your Bite-Sized Adventure?
- What do you hope might feel different about food by the end of this book?

- What might be hard about this adventure?

## **Activity 2: Build-a-Bank Workshop**

### **For You to Know**

The biggest prize you will earn from this book is more freedom around food and a much more fun life.

But learning new things—especially when they feel uncomfortable at first—takes practice. And practice deserves rewards.

Just like athletes earn points for training, Food Adventurers earn points for showing up, trying, and practicing new skills. These points are not for liking food. They are for effort.

### **For You to Do**

**You are going to create your very own Food Adventurer Bank.**

Decide together:

- What will you earn points for? (Examples: smelling a new food, touching a food, sitting calmly at the table, practicing a food activity)
- How many points each effort is worth

Draw or write your Food Adventurer Bank below.

**My Food Adventurer Points:**

**FOR YOU TO DO** ★

1. Gather supplies: scissors, 1 plastic bag, 1 clean glass jar or plastic container, art supplies, and a copy of the 25 Brave Points sheet.
2. Color and decorate the 25 Brave Points.
3. Follow the lines to cut the Brave Points sheet into 25 separate squares.
4. Label plastic bag "Brave Points to Be Earned."
5. Place all Brave Points in this bag.
6. Decorate and label the glass jar or plastic container: "My Brave Points."



You have just created your very own (fabulous) Brave Points Bank where you will store all the Brave Points you earn as you move through this fear busting adventure.



**For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Why is it important to reward effort and not just outcomes?
- How will your adult partner help you remember to notice your effort?

**Activity 3: Food Adventurer Prize Wish List**

For You to Know

Now it's time to talk PRIZES.

Prizes are not bribes. They are a way to celebrate the hard work your brain and body are doing while learning something new.

The prizes you choose should feel exciting, motivating, and fun—but they should not be food-based. This adventure is about changing how food feels, not earning food.

For You to Do

Create your Food Adventurer Prize Wish List.

Work with your adult partner to list prizes you would love to earn using your Food Adventurer Points.

Examples might include:

- A special outing
- Extra play time
- A small toy or game
- Choosing a family activity

My Food Adventurer Prize Wish List:

### MY BRAVE PRIZES WISH LIST

1 Point	<input type="text"/>
5 Points	<input type="text"/>
10 Points	<input type="text"/>
20 Points	<input type="text"/>
25 Points	<input type="text"/>

Decide how many points each prize costs:

Prize \_\_\_\_\_ costs \_\_\_\_\_ points Prize \_\_\_\_\_ costs \_\_\_\_\_ points

For You to Discuss (Together)

- Which prize are you most excited about?
- How will you remind yourself that prizes are earned for trying, not for liking foods?



## FOR YOU TO DISCUSS

Take turns answering these questions with your adult partner. After hearing each other's responses, take a moment to compliment each other for bravely discussing this important topic.

- How would you want to reward yourself for the hard but important work of squashing your fears?
- If you could earn 25 Brave Points, what prize would you choose for yourself?
- Can you give yourself this prize when we both finish this book?

**By completing this activity, you have earned a**



**Great job!**

- ★ **Take a Brave Point from the storage bag.**
- ★ **On the back of the Brave Point, write down (or have your adult partner write down) one thing you learned by completing the activity.**
- ★ **Place the Brave Point in your supercool Brave Points Bank.**

### **Activity 4: Meet Your Food Guard Dog**

*For You To Know:*

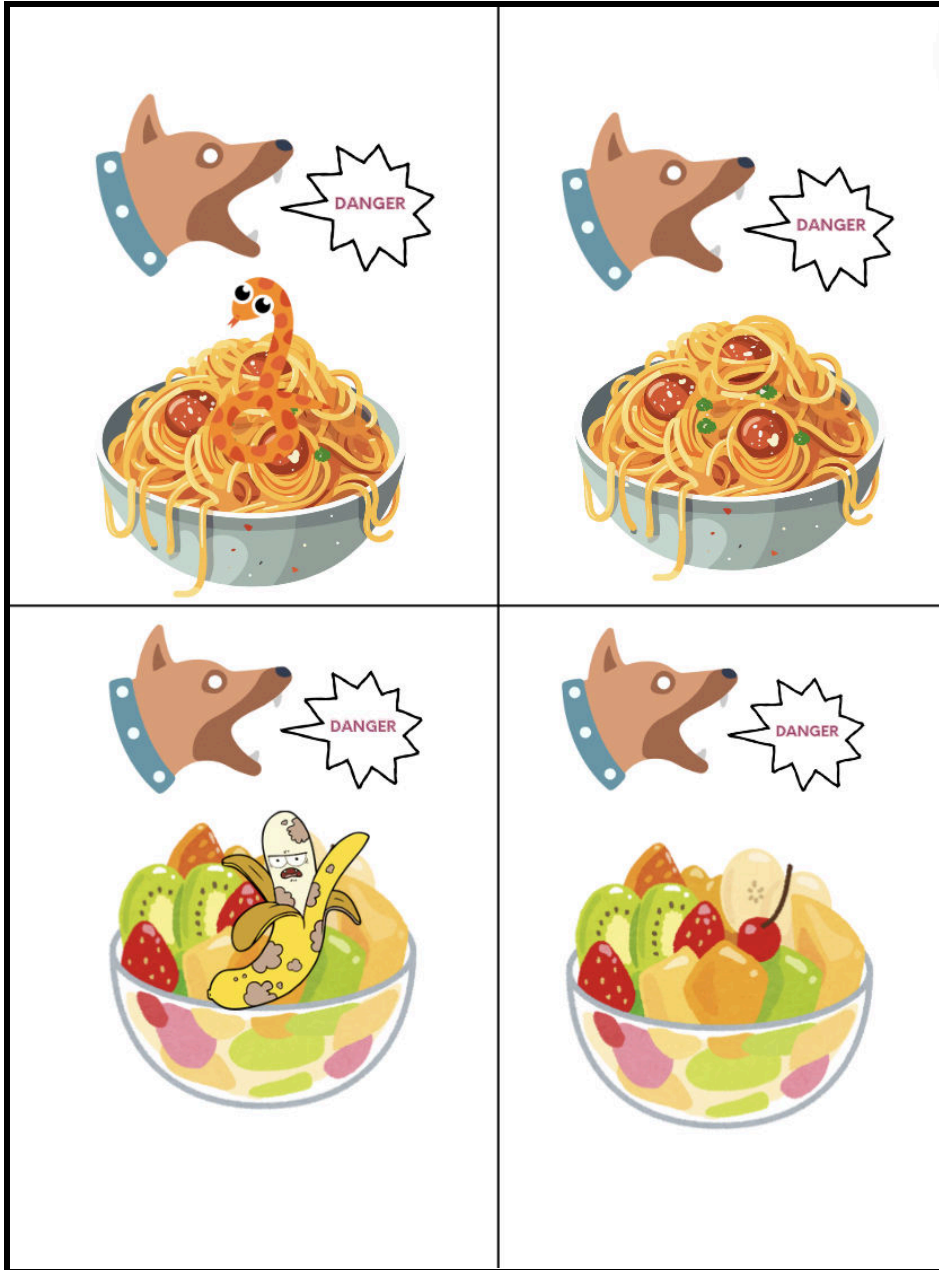
Your food guard dog's job is to try to keep you safe and warn you of all of food's that might be dangerous or yucky.

Just like a real life guard dog, your food guard dog is quick to "bark" and think there is danger even when there is nothing actually wrong.

The good news is that your food guard dog is trainable. This activity book will help train your food guard dog to get better at telling the difference between dangerous food and food that is simply new to you.

*For You To Do:*

1. Place an X on the moments when your food guard dog is barking about something that isn't actually dangerous.
2. Place a ✓ on the moments when it is a good idea for your food guard dog to bark and warn you of danger.



*For You To Discuss:*

- Talk to your adult partner about what they are currently afraid of and how they feel when they are afraid.
- Ask them what they do to avoid making contact with this fear.
- Ask your adult partner to tell you what is similar about their fears and your own dislike of new foods.

**Activity 5: Bark Translator**

*For You To Know:*

Your food guard dog's warnings or barks tell you how awful new foods are going to taste and how uncomfortable you will feel if you were to attempt to try a new food.

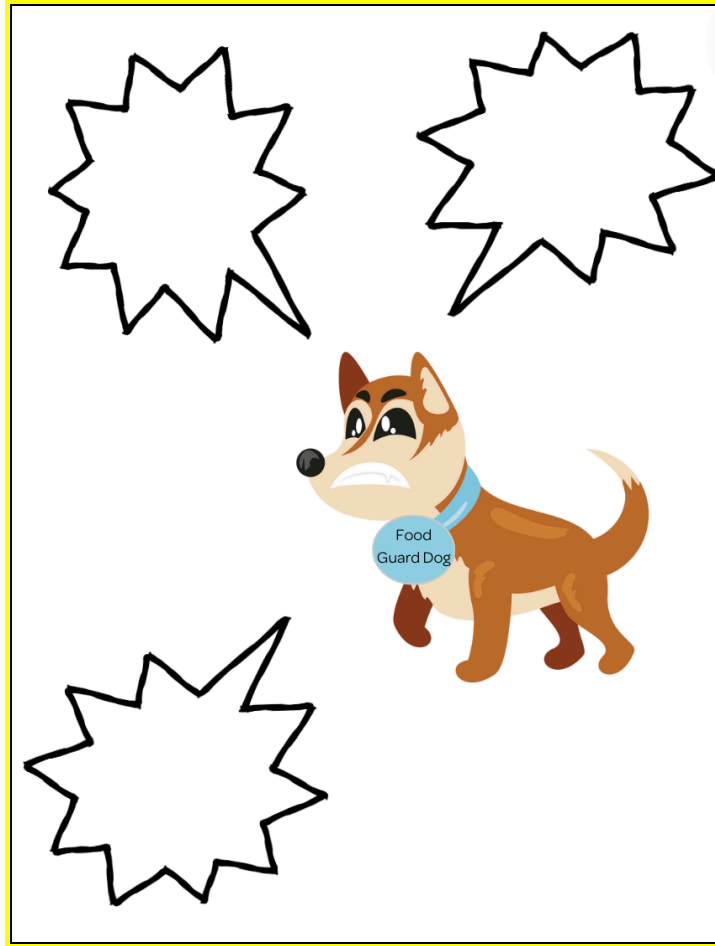
*For You To Do:*

Think about a recent time when you tried to taste a new food and your food guard dog showed up to warn you of danger and protect you from anything bad happening.

Answer the following questions:

- Where was I?
- What food did I try to eat?
- What else do I remember about what was going on?

Fill in the bubbles with the warnings your food guard dog barked at you.



## Activity 6: Your Body on Food Fear

### For You to Know

When your Food Guard Dog barks, your body listens.

Your body thinks danger is nearby, even when the danger is not real.  
That is why food fear can cause:

- A tight or uncomfortable throat
- A nauseous or queasy stomach
- A loss of appetite
- A strong urge to escape, freeze, or push food away

Your body is doing exactly what it is supposed to do when it senses danger. The problem is that your Food Guard Dog has mistaken food for the danger.

### **For You to Do**

Think about how your body feels when food fear shows up.

Hold a “not-safe-yet” food near your mouth.

Notice what happens in your body.

Color or circle areas below where you feel food fear:

- Throat
- Stomach
- Chest
- Hands
- Face

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Which part of your body feels food fear the strongest?
  - Does your adult partner feel food fear in their body sometimes too?
  - What does your body want to do when it feels scared?
- 

## **Activity 7: The Fear of Food Merry-Go-Round**

### **For You to Know**

Your Food Guard Dog is trying to help—but sometimes it accidentally traps you.

When you avoid foods that feel scary, your Food Guard Dog learns, “Good thing I barked. That food really was dangerous.”

This makes it bark even louder next time.

This is called the Food Fear Merry-Go-Round.

### **For You to Do**

#### **Draw the Food Fear Merry-Go-Round:**

1. A new food shows up
2. Your Food Guard Dog barks: “This is bad!”
3. Your body goes into fight, flight, or freeze
4. You avoid or escape the food
5. The scary feelings go down
6. Your Food Guard Dog feels extra sure it was right

**Draw or label each step of the merry-go-round.**

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- How does avoiding food help in the short term?
  - How does it make things harder in the long term?
  - What do you think would happen if you stayed on the ride a little
- 

## **Activity 8: Your Incredible Shrinking Life**

### **For You to Know**

Your Food Guard Dog wants to protect you, but when it barks at too many foods, life can start to feel smaller.

This doesn't happen all at once. Little by little, meals become stressful, choices become limited, and fun experiences can start to disappear.

This activity is not about blame. It is about noticing what picky eating might be taking away — and what you might want back.

### **For You to Do**

Check any boxes that feel true for you.

Because of picky eating, I sometimes:

- Miss out on fun activities because I'm worried about food
- Feel stressed or nervous before meals
- Argue or feel frustrated with my parents about food
- Worry about eating at friends' houses or restaurants
- Feel different or embarrassed around other kids

- Avoid sleepovers, parties, or trips
- Feel tired of explaining what I can and can't eat

Now answer this question:

If food felt less scary, what is one thing your life could have more of?

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### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Which boxes felt most important to you?
  - What do you miss the most right now?
  - What would you like your Food Adventurer life to look like?
- 

### **Activity 9: Bringing on the Fun**

#### **For You to Know**

Think about the word you would use to describe meals right now.

Some kids think of words like stressful, boring, awkward, or scary.

Now think about someone you know who can eat lots of different foods. They often think of meals as fun, relaxing, social, or exciting.

This book is here to help move meals out of the stress zone and into the fun zone.

#### **For You to Do**

Answer these questions:

When I think about eating right now, I think of these words:

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Now imagine a future Food Adventurer version of you.

When Food Adventurer Me thinks about eating, they think of these words:

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Draw a picture of what a fun, relaxed meal might look like for you.

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- What feels different between the two lists of words?
  - What do you think needs to change for meals to feel more fun?
  - How can your adult partner help meals feel calmer and lighter?
- 

## **Activity 10: Eating Then and Now**

### **For You to Know**

There was a time when your Food Guard Dog wasn't in charge yet.

When you were a baby or toddler, your brain trusted your grown-ups to choose food for you. You explored food with curiosity instead of fear.

This means your brain already knows how to eat flexibly. That skill is still there — it just needs practice.

### **For You to Do**

Become a Food Historian.

Ask your parents:

- What foods could I eat when I was a baby or toddler?
- Are there foods I used to eat that feel scary now?

If possible, look at old photos or videos of you eating.

Now practice talking to your Food Guard Dog:

“Hey Food Guard Dog, I know you're scared of \_\_\_\_\_, but here is proof that I was able to eat it before — and I'm still safe.”

Write or draw your proof here:

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## **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- What surprised you about your food history?
- How does seeing proof change how scary the food feels?
- What does this tell you about your brain's ability to relearn?

## **Activity 11: Calm Your Body, Calm Your Food Guard Dog**

### **For You to Know**

Your Food Guard Dog listens closely to your body.

When your body feels tense, rushed, or stressed, your Food Guard Dog thinks danger must be nearby and starts barking louder.

When your body feels calm and steady, your Food Guard Dog gets the message that it is safe to relax.

Learning how to calm your body helps your Food Guard Dog calm down too.

### **For You to Do**

Try these two experiments using one of your safe foods.

#### Experiment 1: Tight Body

- Tighten your muscles for one full minute (clench fists, scrunch shoulders, squeeze legs)
- While your body is tight, take a few bites of your safe food

#### Experiment 2: Calm Body

- Practice square breathing for one minute (breathe in 4, hold 4, breathe out 4, hold 4)
- While your body is calm, take a few bites of the same safe food

Now answer:

- Which experiment felt easier?
- Which one felt more comfortable?

Try it in real life:

- Play a loud recording of dogs barking
- Take a bite of a favorite food while listening

Notice what happens in your body.

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- How did your body change between the two experiments?
  - What does this teach your Food Guard Dog about safety?
  - When might calming your body help most during meals?
- 

## **Activity 12: Training Your Guard Dog to Feel Safe with New Things**

### **For You to Know**

Your brain learns by experience.

Sometimes things start off uncomfortable but become easier the longer you stay with them. Think about:

- Jumping into a cold pool
- Wearing new shoes
- Hearing a loud noise that eventually fades into the background

This is called habituation. It means your Food Guard Dog gets bored when it realizes nothing bad is happening.

### **For You to Do**

Try this practice.

- Write the word WRONG on a piece of paper
- Put the paper in your shoe

Notice how uncomfortable it feels at first.

Walk around and rate the discomfort at:

- 1 minute
- 2 minutes
- 3 minutes
- 4 minutes
- 5 minutes

Now answer:

- Did the discomfort stay the same, get worse, or change?
- What helped your Food Guard Dog calm down?

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- What does this tell you about uncomfortable feelings?
  - How might this help with trying new foods?
  - What would happen if you stayed with food discomfort a little longer?
- 

## **Activity 13: Your Food Explorer Map**

### **For You to Know**

Food Adventurers don't jump from very safe foods straight to very scary foods.

They practice step by step.

A Food Explorer Map helps your Food Guard Dog learn that new foods can be explored slowly and safely.

### **For You to Do**

Create your Food Explorer Map.

Safe Zone:

- Foods that feel easy and comfortable

Exploration Zone:

- Foods that feel a little uncomfortable but possible

Adventure Zone:

- Foods that feel very scary right now

Write or draw foods in each zone.

Each time you explore a food, you can move it closer to the Safe Zone.

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Which foods feel like good starting points?
- How will you know when a food is ready to move zones?
- How can your adult partner support you during exploration?

### **Activity 14: Yucky Thoughts, Yucky Feelings**

*For You To Know:*

What you think impacts what you feel.

*For You To Do:*

1. Food You Like:
  - Think of a food you like.
  - Draw a picture of this food.
  - What thoughts come to mind when you think about this food? (Show an example picture with a thought bubble.)
2. Food You Dislike:
  - Think of a food you dislike.
  - Draw a picture of this food.
  - What thoughts come to mind when you think about this food?
3. Taste Experiment:
  - With your adult partner, prepare a small amount of the food you like.
  - Take a bite, smile, and say out loud one of the positive thoughts you have about this food.

- Take another bite, but this time, frown, cross your arms, and say out loud one of the negative thoughts you have about a food you dislike.
- Compare and contrast: Did the food taste different in practice 1 versus practice 2?
- Next, have your adult partner do the same with one of their favorite foods.

Same food, very different taste experiences...



*For You To Discuss:*

- Ask your adult partner if their thoughts and expressions affected how the food tasted.
- Discuss with your partner why this might be the case.
- Ask your partner if they can think of a time when their thoughts about a food got in the way of enjoying it.

## **Activity 15: Becoming a Food Detective**

### **For You to Know**

Food Adventurers use curiosity instead of fear.

A Food Detective looks for clues instead of danger.

When you discover similarities between foods you already like and foods you are exploring, your Food Guard Dog learns that new foods might not be so different after all.

### **For You to Do**

Choose one food from your Safe Zone and one food from your Exploration Zone.

Example:

- Safe food: Apple
- Exploration food: Carrot

Now investigate your foods.

Look for at least two similarities:

- Color
- Shape
- Crunch or softness
- Smell
- Sound when you tap or bite

Touch, smell, and explore the food like a detective.

Write or draw your findings here:

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### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- What surprised you about the similarities?
- How did being curious change how scary the food felt?
- How might this help when you try other new foods?

## **Activity 16: The Eating Environment Makeover**

### **For You to Know**

Your Food Guard Dog pays attention to patterns.

If meals have felt stressful in the past, your Food Guard Dog may start barking as soon as you sit down — before any food even shows up.

Changing small things about your eating environment helps your Food Guard Dog learn that this is a new beginning.

### **For You to Do**

Work with your family to make your eating environment feel fresh and different.

Choose one or more ideas:

- Buy or choose new placemats
- Change where you sit at the table
- Play calm or fun music during meals
- Add a simple game or question to meals (rose and thorn, 20 questions, sharing a highlight)
- Create a new family rule: no commenting on what or how much anyone is eating

Create a separate Food Explorer Zone for practicing new foods. This should feel low-pressure and different from regular meals.

Write or draw the changes you will try:

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Which changes feel most helpful?
- How might this help your Food Guard Dog feel safer?
- How will your family protect this new environment?

### **Activity 17: Become a Food Journalist**

#### **For You to Know**

Food Adventurers learn by listening and observing.

A Food Journalist is curious about other people's food experiences instead of judging their own.

Hearing how others enjoy food can help your Food Guard Dog learn new ways of thinking.

### **For You to Do**

Interview three people you know.

Ask each person:

- What is your favorite food?
- What do you like about it?
- How does it taste to you?

Write down what they say.

Then find a picture of each food and report:

“\_\_\_\_\_ likes \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Did people describe food in different ways?
- Did any descriptions make you curious?
- How did listening instead of eating feel for your Food Guard Dog?

## **Activity 18: Top Chef You**

### **For You to Know**

Being in charge can help your Food Guard Dog feel safer.

When you prepare food, you control how it looks, smells, and feels — which can make exploring food less scary.

### **For You to Do**

You are the Top Chef.

With your adult partner:

- Choose one food or dish to make for them
- Find a recipe
- Shop for ingredients together

Prepare the meal.

You may need help with things like turning on the stove or using a sharp knife, but you are in charge.

Serve the meal and sit with your adult partner as they eat.

Ask them:

- What flavors do you notice?
- What do you enjoy about it?

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- How did it feel to be the chef?
- Did being in charge change how food felt?
- What did your Food Guard Dog learn from this experience?

### **Activity 19: Name That Food**

#### **For You to Know**

Food Adventurers use all their senses.

Sometimes it's easier to explore food when taste is not the first step.

Using smell, touch, and curiosity helps your Food Guard Dog learn that food can be interesting—not dangerous.

#### **For You to Do**

You and your adult partner will each choose five foods from the kitchen.

Do not show each other your foods.

Take turns wearing a blindfold.

For each food:

- Smell it
- Touch it
- Guess what it might be

If you want an extra clue, you may take a tiny bite—but that part is optional.

Keep score if you'd like.

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Which sense was the most helpful?
  - Did guessing make the food feel less scary?
  - What surprised you during this game?
- 

### **Activity 20: Create a Rainbow**

#### **For You to Know**

Trying new foods does not have to be all-or-nothing.

Even small steps—looking, smelling, touching—help train your Food Guard Dog.

Colorful foods give your brain lots of chances to practice curiosity.

#### **For You to Do**

Go to a grocery store or farmers market with your adult partner.

Visit the fruit and vegetable section.

Choose foods that create a rainbow:

- Red
- Orange
- Yellow
- Green
- Blue or purple

Place small portions on a plate.

Create a color spinner or take turns choosing a color.

For each color:

- Look at the food
- Smell it
- Touch it
- If you are ready, lick or take a tiny bite

You get full credit for every step—even stopping before tasting.

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- Which color felt easiest?
  - Which felt hardest?
  - What did your Food Guard Dog learn?
- 

## **Activity 21: Food Halloween Costume Party**

### **For You to Know**

New does not always mean totally different.

Sometimes a small change can help your Food Guard Dog feel braver.

Giving food a “costume” helps your brain practice flexibility.

### **For You to Do**

Choose one of your favorite foods.

Now give it a costume by:

- Adding one new ingredient
- Changing the shape
- Preparing it in a slightly different way

Examples:

- Pasta with a new sauce
- A sandwich cut differently
- A familiar food with a new topping

Describe or draw your food costume:

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### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- How did the costume change how the food felt?
  - Did it feel different from trying a totally new food?
  - What does this teach your Food Guard Dog?
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## **Activity 22: Fake It Until You Make It**

### **For You to Know**

Your body sends powerful messages to your brain.

When you smile, relax, and act confident, your brain gets the message that things are okay—even if you feel unsure at first.

This can help your Food Guard Dog calm down faster.

### **For You to Do**

Choose one food from your Exploration Zone.

Pretend you are an actor in a movie eating a delicious meal.

As you explore the food:

- Sit up tall
- Smile
- Talk out loud about what you enjoy or notice

Examples:

- “This smells interesting.”

- “I like how crunchy this is.”

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- How did acting confident change how the food felt?
- What did your body do differently?
- How can you use this skill in real meals?

## **Activity 23: What to Do When Things Feel Stuck**

### **For You to Know**

Every Food Adventurer gets stuck sometimes.

Getting stuck does not mean you are failing. It means your Food Guard Dog is barking louder again because it needs more practice.

Feeling uncomfortable is part of learning. The goal is not to make fear disappear, but to learn that you can handle it.

### **For You to Do**

When food practice feels hard, try this reset:

- Go back to an easier step on your Food Explorer Map
- Practice calming your body first
- Shorten the practice time
- Switch from tasting to smelling or touching

Circle one thing you can try next time:

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### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- What usually makes things feel stuck?
- What has helped in the past?
- How can your adult partner support you without pressure?

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## **Activity 24: How to Keep Practicing Flexible Eating**

## **For You to Know**

Flexible eating is a skill.

Skills get stronger with practice.

Even small, repeated steps help your Food Guard Dog learn that food is safe and manageable.

## **For You to Do**

Create your Food Adventurer Practice Plan.

Decide together:

- How often you will practice (example: a few times a week)
- Where practice will happen (Food Explorer Zone, kitchen counter, restaurant)
- What counts as practice (smelling, touching, tasting)

Write your plan here:

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## **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- How will you keep practice playful?
- How will you celebrate effort?
- How will you notice progress, even when it is small?

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## **Activity 25: When to Ask for Extra Help**

### **For You to Know**

Some Food Adventurers need extra coaching.

Asking for help is a strong and smart choice.

If food fear feels very intense, keeps spreading, or is affecting health, energy, or growth, it may be time to get additional support.

### **For You to Do**

Talk with your adult partner about these questions:

- Is food fear still getting in the way of daily life?
- Are meals still very stressful most of the time?
- Does your body struggle to get enough energy or nutrients?

If the answer to any of these is yes, it may help to work with a therapist or feeding specialist who understands food anxiety and ARFID.

### **For You to Discuss (Together)**

- What kind of help would feel most supportive?
  - What questions would you want to ask a helper?
  - How can this book still support you alongside extra help?
- 

## **A Final Note to Food Adventurers and Their Adult Partners**

Learning to eat more flexibly is brave work.

It takes patience, practice, and a lot of kindness toward your brain and body.

Your Food Guard Dog was never trying to ruin meals or make life harder. It was trying to protect you the best way it knew how.

Now, with new skills and practice, you are teaching it a better way.

Remember:

- Progress is not measured by how much you eat
- Effort matters more than outcomes
- Curiosity is more powerful than fear

Keep practicing. Keep playing. Keep exploring.

Your Bite-Sized Adventure does not end here—it grows with you.