

## Overcoming Food Aversions with Special Guest Susan Roberts – Part I

Guest: Susan L. Roberts – M.Div., OTRL, Nutritionist, Integrative Health Coach

Susan got interested in therapy when she was young through reading about the field. She was exposed to occupational therapy after working in an Easter Seals Camp. Susan studied at Boston University. When Susan was in Tucson, Arizona she developed an interest in traditional healers and the neurobiology and sensory integration related to that field. Her interest in the area of traditional healers eventually led Susan to study at Harvard University. Susan currently resides in New York. She is an accomplished author, speaker, and teacher. She is also currently studying Qigong with Dr. Nan Lu.

Susan developed an interest in the area of nutrition in regards to occupational therapy when she was working in a high school and found a brochure for the Institute of Integrative Nutrition. Their approach to nutrition seemed to mirror the concepts of occupational therapy to Susan so she became very interested and began to study nutrition along with feeding. During her time in Tucson, Arizona Susan had the opportunity to learn from Marsha Dunn Klein, OTR/L, MED, FAOTA.

Eating and meal times connect to everything else in the occupational therapy framework of practice.

Susan developed an interest in the area of pediatrics through reading biographies on individuals like Hellen Keller and books like *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* by Joanne Greenberg throughout her middle school and high school years. Between her junior and senior years of high school Susan had the opportunity to work in a children's camp and she knew after that experience that she was meant to work with children in the context of occupational therapy. Susan has worked throughout the lifespan, but she always comes back to the kids.

PDT was first exposed to Susan's work through her class "Play with Your Food" that many of our therapists attended. Susan has taught this class for about 5 years. The class provides an integrative way of looking at feeding where attendees focus a lot on play because that is the primary occupation of childhood.

Many times in feeding therapy, therapists solely focus on the mechanics of feeding and forget that eating is something we do because we enjoy it. If the enjoyment factor of eating is missing, then problems will always exist.

When the body experiences fun / enjoyment there are outpourings of oxytocin and number of other good hormones that set the body up to make a number of connections including being set up for learning as well as making social connections,

There is a myth that children who experience food aversions will eat when they get hungry. This is not true. Food had never been an enjoyable experience for them and it is associated, many times, with pain. These children will go down before they put an unfamiliar food in their mouth.

Susan's framework for making therapy fun is starting with a play evaluation. Susan uses the Rainbow Kids Play Scale which she adapted from the Knox Preschool Play Scale. The Rainbow Kids Play Scale can be used beyond preschool and looks at play which is great for kids who don't respond well or don't understand the verbal directions given in other standardized tests. The Rainbow Kids Play Scale allows the clinician to observe the child to determine what they can and can't do.

One of the major adaptations of Susan's Rainbow Kids Play Scale is using an organized color system to solely observe and measure the developmental state of the child instead versus chronological numbers. This helps the clinician to share the information in a more receptive way to parents / caregivers. When the Rainbow Kids Play Scale is scored it can then reveal the age(s) associated with the child's development.

For many of these children with food aversions, the idea of food is so saturated with anxiety and pain that it is best to take the food away from the table and begin to play in different ways with the food. The clinician should first develop a trusting relationship with child through play without food. Once that relationship has been established the clinician can begin to introduce foods in a playful way that doesn't require the child to eat it.

Eating is the quintessential self-regulation activity.

We tend as therapists, because we know so much, to share too much information and it is too much for the parent / caregiver to take in. One helpful coaching tip is to encourage the parent / caregiver by sharing with them what they are currently doing right, why you liked it, and then give only one helpful tip. Positive psychologists have shown that when you focus on what is positive it pulls everything up, but when you focus on the negative it pulls everything down. This tip helps encourage and lift up the parents / caregivers of the child.

Good food is food that looks, smells, feels, and tastes good. Sometimes this isn't the most nutritious choice, but it is good food.

“Our food isn’t healthy. We are healthy. Our food is nutritious. I’m all about the words. Words are the key to giving people the tools they need to figure out what to eat. Everyone’s so confused.” - Roxanne Sukol, (See the full article at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/no-food-is-healthy-not-even-kale/2016/01/15/4a5c2d24-ba52-11e5-829c-26ffb874a18d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/no-food-is-healthy-not-even-kale/2016/01/15/4a5c2d24-ba52-11e5-829c-26ffb874a18d_story.html))

When we determine if a food is nutritious we have to look at the macronutrients (fats, proteins, and carbohydrates) and the micronutrients (vitamins, minerals, etc.). Macronutrients are needed in higher quantity in the body while micronutrients, which are no less vital to nutrition, are required by the body in smaller amounts. Probiotics are needed as well.

The term “nutritionist” is an unregulated term. As medical professionals we should seek out registered dietitians because they are licensed individuals. Whenever you hear the term “nutritionist” you need to ask more questions such as “Where was your training?”, and, “How much experience have you had?”.

[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) is a website that helps the public find registered dietitians in their area. You can enter your zip code and a list of registered dietitians in your area will be produced. Again, when finding a registered dietitian be sure to ask questions about their experience and level of comfortability working with your patient.

If you are working in a developmental center, there is most likely a dietitian on the team with which you can collaborate. This is also true for children who are on food stamps or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

With children that have such a narrow range of foods should not be placed on a diet, at least not at first. These children don’t need foods taken away, but added to their diet. Once there is enough of a variety then the clinician can begin to steer the family in what foods to possibly eliminate. Dietitians are a great resource in this process because their knowledge creates much more nutritional “wiggle room” in what can satisfy a child’s needs.

The Greenspan Floortime Approach parallel’s the Knox Preschool Play Scale very closely. The colors of Susan’s adapted Rainbow Kids Play Scale directly coincide with the Floortime Approach.

Susan has authored many books. In her first teaching position at Eastern Kentucky University she was given the Introduction to Human Movement / Kinesiology class. She realized that there were no text books at that time written by OT’s (occupational therapists). Susan felt that this was strongly needed to represent the OT perspective on the subject. So Susan’s first book was titled *Biomechanics: Problem Solving in the Context of Activity*. When the publisher wanted to do a second addition Susan partnered with David Green to publish *Kinesiology: Movement in the Context of Activity, 2nd Edition*. The third edition of the book was just released in February 2016.

When Susan started teaching about mealtimes she authored the book *My Kid Eats Everything: The Journey from Picky to Adventurous Eating*. She then authored a smaller follow-up book titled *The Food Explorer's Passport: for Mealtime Adventures* which is basic instruction on ways to help kids keep exploring more foods.

Children are hardwired to stop trying new foods when they become mobile (cruising & crawling). This is a great survival instinct, but it becomes very imperative to teach children how to explore new foods. Children have to be taught how to determine what foods are safe to eat.

Children are the boss of what they eat. Two and three-year-old children don’t have much control over their world, but they can control what goes into their mouth and what they eat. Children have to be taught how to explore new foods in a context that is positive and fun. Ellyn Satter, author and recognized feeding authority, calls this The Division of Responsibility.

To learn more about Susan, you can visit her website at [www.susanroberts.com](http://www.susanroberts.com) or [www.changesot.com](http://www.changesot.com).