

Thinking About Color Contrast

As vision professionals, we often talk about **contrast** or the **state of being strikingly different from something else**¹ when we consider strategies for visually alerting children with visual impairment. We might recommend wearing simple backgrounds (black or white shirts) when introducing single color toys or providing a brightly colored play surface in the living room or playroom to focus play in a certain area.

But what about at mealtime? Another definition of “contrast” **is the enhancement of the apparent brightness or clarity of a visual target provided by the juxtaposition of different colors or textures.**¹ What better way to interest young children with visual impairment in new foods and self-feeding than to provide brightly colored, healthy foods on contrasting backgrounds in the mealtime environment? Mealtime is the perfect opportunity to discuss colors, and even children with extremely limited vision need to know and understand what colors different foods are so they can engage in conversations with their peers as they grow older. Families will enjoy thinking about colors and contrast as they introduce new foods to their children.

The easiest way to talk to parents about contrasting colors is to introduce a simple color wheel:



Colors that are the most different, or contrast, **are across the color wheel from each other.** For instance, the green apples above contrast with the red peppers, the yellow lemons contrast with the purple plums, and the blueberries contrast with the oranges. In addition, deep colors have more contrast than pale colors.

¹ Merriam-Webster's collegiate Dictionary

Once families are thinking about contrast, here are some suggestions to visually alert their children as part of the mealtime routine:

- Use a contrasting sock cover (red or yellow) on the child's bottle and wear a green or purple shirt during the mealtime
- Lighter colored high chair trays may contrast with more foods than darker colored ones
- Use washable shelf liners or placemats on the table to increase contrast when necessary
- Have contrasting, unbreakable plates available to change out at the table
- If the child is working on using a utensil, make sure the spoon/fork is also high contrast
- Engage the whole family in participating in a "color of the week" activity and challenge everyone to eat as many "red" foods as they can and talk about them
- When in the grocery store or farmer's market, ask your toddler to find different colors in the produce section or just talk about them
- End the family meal with a simple song:

Rainbow plate, rainbow plate, tell me the colors that you ate!

Healthy foods come in a rainbow of bright colors. Vibrant green spinach and peas, pink grapefruit, and red and green apples provide opportunities to interest the young child with visual impairment in new foods and develop healthy eating habits.

Need inspiration for discussing the rainbow of healthy foods? Check out <http://www.rainbowplate.com/#home> or like *My Rainbow Plate* on Facebook.

Claire is nine months old and has a visual impairment that is best addressed by presenting limited high contrast items on a surface. Her family has a new high chair that she is ready to sit in that has a dark grey tray. Claire is interested in new foods and tastes and is willing to try almost anything that her parents feed her with a spoon. Her father would like her to start self-feeding. Today at lunch, her family has small, soft chunks of sweet potato and pieces of scrambled egg. Both of these foods show up well on the dark grey highchair tray and Claire is motivated to reach out and bring pieces to her mouth. She smiles when her family praises her efforts and claps for her. Her mother brings over some blueberries and puts them down on the tray and is surprised when Claire seems totally uninterested in them. Typically, she loves all different types of fruit.

Why do you think Claire is not responding to the blueberries in her new high chair? What could you explain to her family that might help them understand? What strategies could we problem solve with them to help Claire enjoy the blueberries?