



wonderful mind

Child and Youth Mental Health Services

ARFID IN NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN

Clinical Guide, Operational Toolkit & Parent Manual

1. DEFINING ARFID IN NEURODIVERGENT POPULATIONS

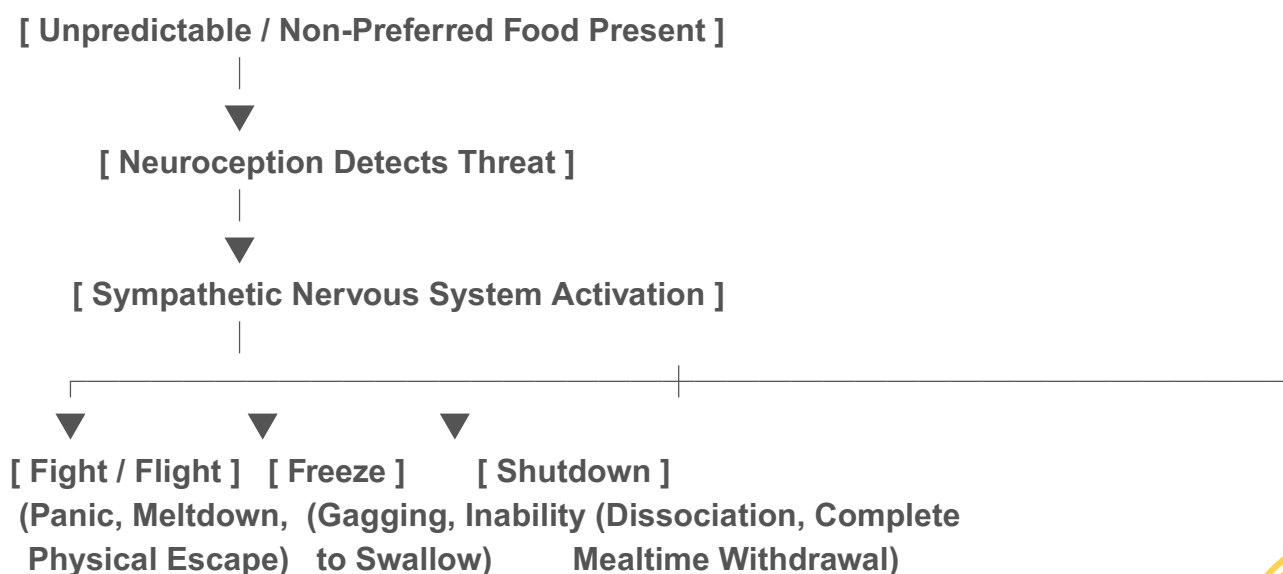
What is ARFID?

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) is a clinical feeding condition characterized by a persistent failure to meet appropriate nutritional and/or energy requirements. Unlike Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, ARFID does not involve body image distress, weight anxiety, or shape distortion.

The Neurodivergent Physiology: Safety vs. Behavior

In autistic children, ADHDers, and neurodivergent individuals with sensory processing differences, ARFID is fundamentally a neurological safety and regulatory threshold issue.

Unsafe, non-preferred, or unpredictable foods do not provoke typical "picky eating" refusal; they trigger a physiological autonomic fight-or-flight nervous system response (mediated by the sympathetic nervous system). What may appear to an outside observer as behavioral stubbornness, defiance, or a meltdown is actually a neurological distress reaction driven by neuroception (the brain's subconscious detection of threat).



The Three Core ARFID Subtypes / Drivers

While many neurodivergent children present with a combination, ARFID typically presents across three main drivers:

Sensory Avoidance:

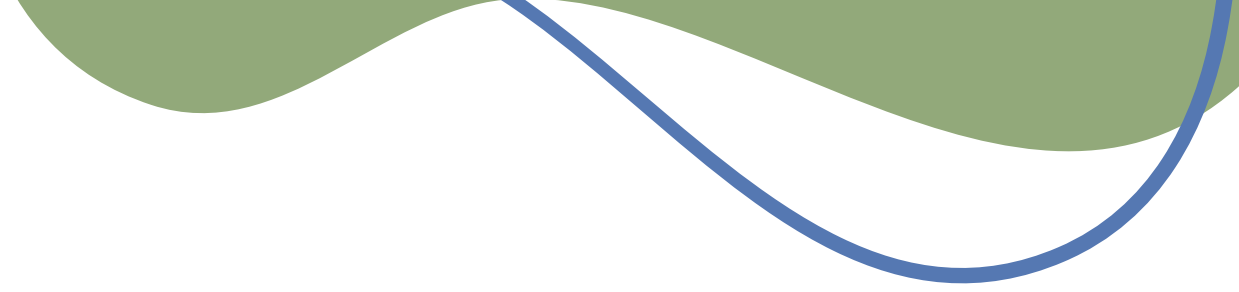
- **Drivers:** Aversion based on texture, consistency, temperature, smell, visual appearance, or brand inconsistency.
- **ND Connection:** Autistic and sensory-sensitive individuals often have heightened tactile or oral sensitivities. A single micro-variation in batch consistency (e.g., a slightly softer chip or lumpier sauce) signals contamination or danger to the brain.

Fear of Aversive Consequences:

- **Drivers:** Avoidance driven by phobias, trauma, or anxiety surrounding choking, vomiting, nausea, allergic reactions, or severe abdominal pain.
- **ND Connection:** Heightened autonomic reactivity and difficulty processing traumatic physical events can lock the nervous system into extreme protective avoidance after a single gagging or choking incident.

Low Hunger Drive / Lack of Interest in Eating:

- **Drivers:** Minimal intrinsic motivation to eat, rapid satiety, or forgetting to eat.
- **ND Connection:** Frequently tied to interoceptive differences (difficulty sensing internal bodily signals like gastric contraction or hypoglycemia), executive function overload (ADHD hyperfocus or task switching friction), or physical oral-motor exhaustion.



2. CLINICAL SIGNS & DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS

Occupational Therapists, pediatricians, and caregivers should monitor for the following clinical indicators:

- **Shrinking Food Repertoire:** A diet restricted to 5–20 "safe" foods. Crucially, when a safe food is "dropped" (due to a bad sensory experience or burnout), it is rarely recovered without structured, low-pressure support.
 - **Brand & Visual Rigidity:** Acceptance is strictly limited to exact brands, specific packaging designs, or precise shape cuts (e.g., only McDonald's chicken nuggets, or only crustless white bread cut into triangles).
 - **Autonomic Distress:** Rapid escalation to fight-or-flight reactions (meltdowns, gagging, retching, physical escape from the table, or panic) when a non-preferred food is brought into proximity.
 - **Interoceptive Mismatch:** Inability to reliably interpret internal signals of hunger, fullness, or digestion, leading to prolonged periods without food or sudden dysregulation caused by unrecognised hypoglycemia.
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Diagnostic Comparison: Picky Eating vs. Neurodivergent ARFID

Feature	Typical Picky Eating	Neurodivergent ARFID
Repertoire Size	30+ foods; comfortably accepts minor brand or cooking variations.	Fewer than 15–20 foods; strict brand, cut, and presentation rigidity.
Nervous System State	Mild complaining, bargaining, or age-appropriate refusal.	Autonomic fight-or-flight: panic, physical escape, gagging, or shutdown.
Sensory Boundaries	Tolerates non-preferred food on the same table or plate.	Contamination anxiety; intense distress from room odors or food proximity.
Food Loss & Recovery	May reject a food temporarily and re-accept it later on.	Dropped safe foods are permanently lost without formal OT intervention.
Developmental Course	Resolves naturally with developmental age and exposure.	Persists, worsens, or narrows over time without affirmative clinical support.

3. OT ASSESSMENT BATTERY FOR ARFID

An effective Occupational Therapy assessment for ARFID must look beyond simple intake logs to evaluate sensory modulation, interoception, posture, and motor coordination.

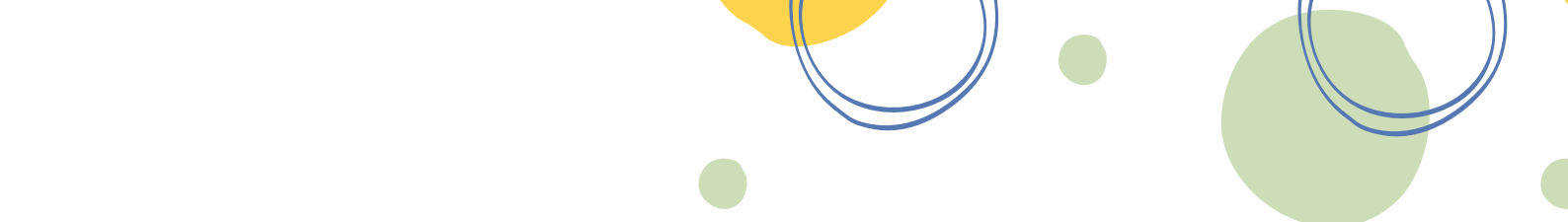
1. Sensory Profile 2 / Sensory Processing Measure-2 (SPM-2)

- Purpose: Evaluates oral, tactile, olfactory, visual, and auditory processing thresholds.
- Focus Areas: Oral hypersensitivity (texture/temperature aversion), visual clutter tolerance at the meal table, and olfactory sensitivities to room cooking smells.

2. Comprehensive Food Chaining Inventory

Purpose: Categorizes and maps every food item in the child's history into clinical tiers:

- Tier 1 (Anchor Safe Foods): Trusted, always eaten, brand-specific.
 - Tier 2 (Adjacent Foods): Minor variations of safe foods (e.g., same brand, different shape).
 - Tier 3 (Neutral Foods): Tolerated in proximity or via tools, but not ingested.
 - Tier 4 (Unsafe Foods): Triggers immediate autonomic distress or fight-or-flight.
 - Tier 5 (Lost Foods): Previously accepted safe foods that were burned out or rejected.
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3. Interoception Assessment Framework

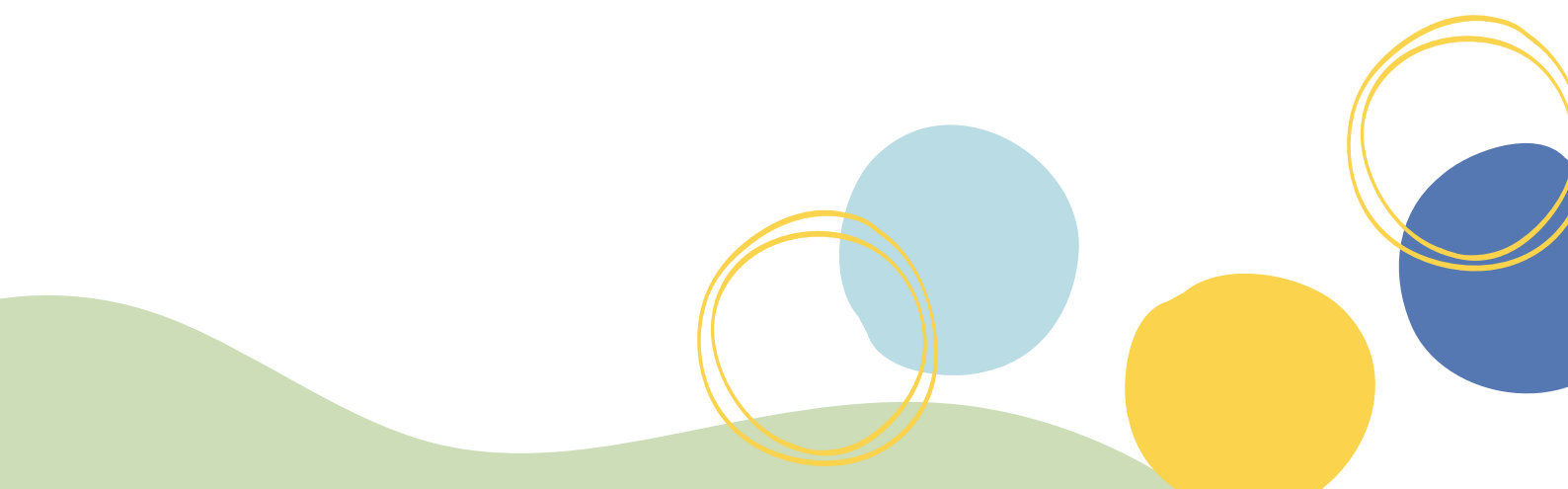
- Purpose: Evaluates the child's conscious awareness of internal physiological cues.
- Focus Areas: Gastric rumbling, stomach fullness, swallowing mechanics, heart rate changes, and energy level shifts related to nourishment.

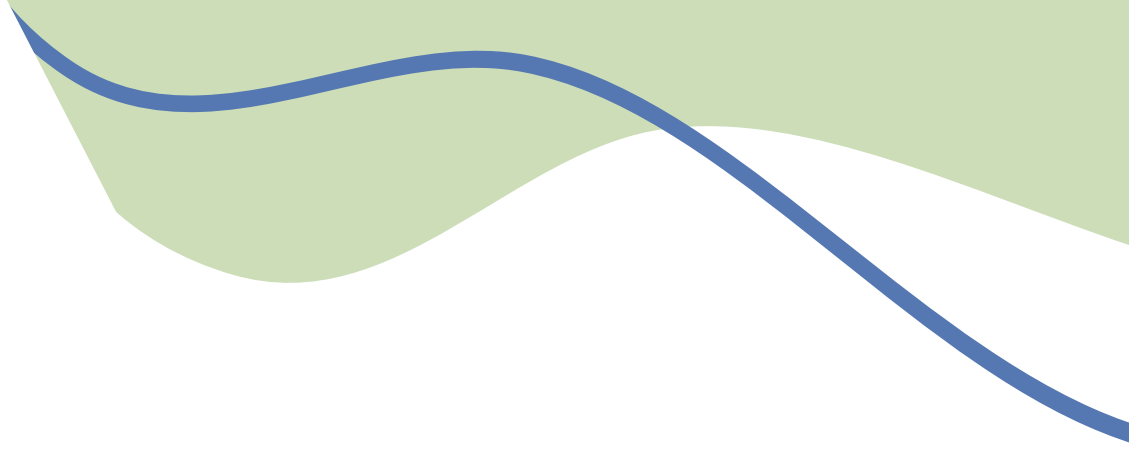
4. Postural Mechanics & Oral-Motor Screen

- Purpose: Ensures the child has the physical base required for safe, non-fatiguing eating.
- Focus Areas: Seating base stability, 90-90-90 foot and trunk support, core stamina, jaw stability, lateral tongue movement, and bolus formation/swallow safety.

4. PLAY-BASED HIERARCHY & CLINICAL MODALITIES

Direct demands to "take a bite" increase anxiety and shut down salivary and digestive function. Play-based therapy removes all consumption expectations, establishing a low-arousal environment for systematic desensitization.





The 6-Step Systematic Exploration Ladder

[Step 6: Biting & Tasting] —► Optional, 100% child-directed exploration



[Step 5: Tactile & Oral Contact] —► Touching to hands, chin, lips, or teeth



[Step 4: Olfactory Exploration] —► Smelling from a safe, comfortable distance



[Step 3: Tool Interaction] —► Poking, chopping, or stamping using utensils

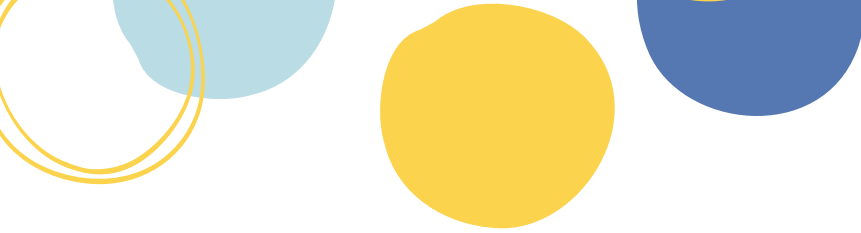


[Step 2: Environmental Tolerance] —► Food resides in personal space without demands



[Step 1: Visual Acceptance] —► Looking at food across table or behind glass





The 6-Step Systematic Exploration Ladder

1. **Visual Acceptance:** Looking at food across the room, at the table, or through a clear barrier.
2. **Environmental Tolerance:** The food item resides within the child's personal space without any expectation of interaction.
3. **Tool Interaction:** Manipulating food using intermediary tools (tongs, forks, cookie cutters, toothpicks) to keep hands clean while exploring texture.
4. **Olfactory Exploration:** Smelling food from a distance or incorporated into pretend play (e.g., "scented potions").
5. **Tactile & Oral Contact:** Touching food to fingers, hands, chin, lips, or teeth without requirement to chew or swallow.
6. **Biting & Tasting:** Completely optional, self-directed exploration led entirely by the child's internal readiness. Spit cups are always provided and normalized.

Applied Clinical Play Modalities

Sensory Construction & Art: Using pretzel sticks or crackers as building beams and safe spreads (peanut butter, hummus, marshmallow fluff) as "mortar" to build structures.

Deconstructive Sensory Play: Placing crunchy items (chips, crackers) inside zip-lock bags to crush with mallets or rolling pins into "dust," modifying texture without demanding oral contact.

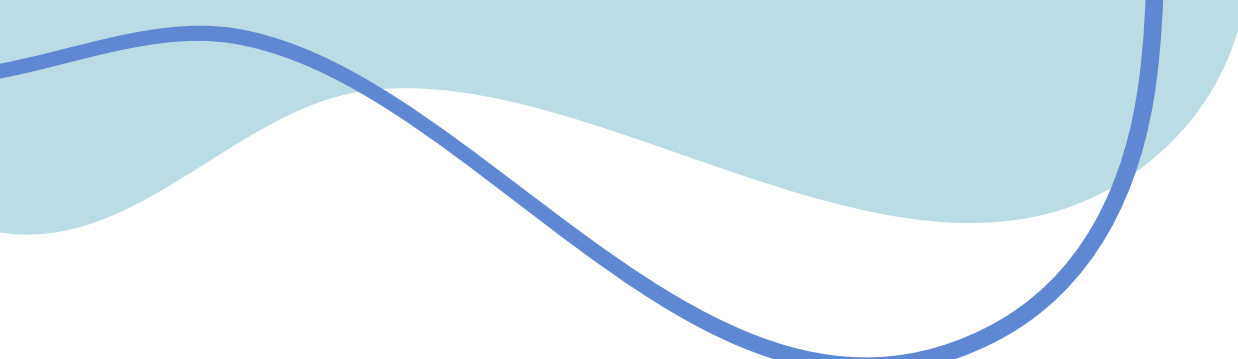
Kitchen Science Exploration: Combining baking soda with lemon slices, dipping breadsticks into liquids to observe absorption, or using digital sound meters to measure the "crunch volume" of different foods to reframe properties objectively.

5. PRINTABLE CLINICAL PLANNING TOOL & WORKSHEET

Food Chaining Mapping Ladder Worksheet

Client Name: _____ DOB: _____ Date: _____
Primary OT: _____ Anchor Safe Food: _____

Step	Level	Proposed Food Item & Brand	Specific Sensory Modification	Readiness (0-5)
1	Anchor Safe (Baseline)	<i>e.g., Brand A Salted Potato Chips</i>	None (Trusted baseline item)	___ / 5
2	Micro-Variation	<i>e.g., Brand A Chips (Slightly warm)</i>	Microwaved for 3 seconds; served in same bowl	___ / 5
3	Texture / Flavor Bridge	<i>e.g., Brand B Salted Potato Chips</i>	Similar crunch profile, subtle change in salt/oil	___ / 5
4	Structural Shift	<i>e.g., Brand A Potato Sticks</i>	Same base ingredient & brand, altered shape cut	___ / 5
5	Target Goal Food	<i>e.g., Baked Potato Wedges</i>	Target goal item accepted into home repertoire	___ / 5



SMART & Neurodiversity-Affirming OT Goals

Goal 1: Mealtime Self-Regulation (Long-Term)

"Client will maintain a self-regulated nervous system state (zero fight-or-flight escape or panic behaviors) during family mealtimes for up to 15 minutes using supportive seating and sensory accommodation tools across 4 of 5 observed meal opportunities over 12 months."

Goal 2: Low-Pressure Exploration (Short-Term)

"Client will independently engage in tool-mediated food play (using tongs or cutters to manipulate a neutral target food) for 5 consecutive minutes without autonomic dysregulation in 4 of 5 clinical sessions over 3 months."

Goal 3: Self-Advocacy & Autonomy (Short-Term)

"Client will independently utilize a visual cue card or verbal phrase (e.g., 'Not today' or 'I need a learning plate') to communicate bodily boundaries during mealtimes in 100% of trials over 6 months."



6. HOME MEALTIME & PARENT IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

To reduce pressure and restore mealtime safety, caregiving roles must be strictly delineated:

Parents & Caregivers Decide:

WHAT food is offered (always including safe foods).

WHEN meals and snacks occur (predictable routine).

WHERE food is served (supportive, low-arousal seating environment).

The Child Decides:

IF they touch, explore, or eat any offered food.

HOW MUCH they eat.

HOW they explore food during play (using tools, hands, or visual inspection).

Golden Rules for Home Mealtimes

- **Always Provide 1–2 Safe Foods:** Never present a meal containing exclusively unfamiliar or non-preferred items. Every plate or meal setting must include at least one fully trusted safe food in its exact required brand/presentation.
- **Utilize a "Learning Plate":** Place new, adjacent, or family foods on a separate side plate or bowl slightly removed from the child's main plate. This eliminates "contamination anxiety" while maintaining visual exposure.
- **Eliminate All Pressure & Bargaining:** Ban phrases like "Just one more bite," "Eat your veggies before dessert," or "Try it for me." Demands trigger an immediate sympathetic nervous system spike that stops salivation and halts stomach motility.
- **Optimize Postural Grounding:** Ensure the child's feet are completely supported on a sturdy footrest or stool (90° hips, knees, and ankles). Postural instability increases physical fatigue and sensory vulnerability during eating.
- **Normalize the "Spit Bucket":** Provide an opaque napkin or dedicated "discard bowl" where the child can spit out uncomfortable foods without shame or reaction. Knowing they have a clean exit strategy lowers anxiety significantly.



Low-Pressure Home Sensory Play Activities

Activity	Setup & Instructions	Primary Therapeutic Benefit
Food Building & Architecture	Use pretzel sticks, mini crackers, or rice cakes with spreads (peanut butter, cream cheese, or hummus) as "mortar" to build towers or houses.	Encourages tool manipulation, fine motor control, and gentle tactile contact with soft textures.
Crushing & Texture Modification	Place crunchy chips, crackers, or cereals inside a sealed zip-lock bag. Provide a rolling pin, mallet, or toy truck to crush items into "dust."	Allows total deconstruction of food textures and sound exploration without expectation to ingest.
Kitchen Science Experiments	Drop lemon juice or vinegar onto baking soda placed on target veggies, or submerge dry foods into water/dips to watch absorption rates.	Provides olfactory and visual desensitization through an objective, scientific framing lens.

7. COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE DIRECTORY

Recommended Books & Clinical Manuals

For Parents & Caregivers:

- Coloring Outside the Lines: Raising A Neurodivergent Child by Meg Leahy.
- Helping Your Child with Extreme Picky Eating by Katja Rowell, MD, and Jenny McGlothlin, MS, CCC-SLP.
- The Eating Disorders Pocketbook: ARFID Edition by Elizabeth Joshi.

Children's Picture Books:

- Taste Your Thoughts by Sandhya Menon.
- Some Brains: A Book Celebrating Neurodiversity by Chloe Hayden.

Digital Resources & Professional Organizations:

- ARFID Awareness UK: Comprehensive diagnostic breakdowns, parent toolkits, and school advocacy resources. (arfidawarenessuk.org)
- The Feeding Coalition / Feeding Matters: Offers the Infant and Child Feeding Questionnaire (ICFQ) and extensive pediatric feeding disorder (PFD) resources. (feedingmatters.org)
- Kelly Mahler Interoception Framework: Resources and curriculum for building interoceptive awareness in neurodivergent children. (kelly-mahler.com)
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN): Neurodiversity-affirming guides on sensory integration and dietary self-advocacy. (autisticadvocacy.org)
- Recommended Podcasts & Media
- The Feeding Pod (Hosted by Brianna Miluk, MS, CCC-SLP, CLC) – Deep dives into evidence-based, neuroaffirming pediatric feeding therapy and ARFID strategies.



Key Reminder for Caregivers

- Keep home food exploration short (10–15 minutes)
- Focus entirely on calm co-regulation and emotional safety.
- Eating during food play is completely optional exploration without pressure is where true long-term progress begins!



ENQUIRIES

Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm

Doreen:

1 Laurimar Blvd, Doreen, VIC 3754

Craigieburn:

35 Craigieburn Road, Craigieburn, VIC 3064

www.wonderfulmind.com.au

admin@wonderfulmind.com.au

(03) 8104 9051

