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Autism poses extra mealtime challenges

Bobby Burns The Daily Reflector

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Kathy Kolasa

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Q I have a good friend with a child on the autism spectrum. We like to dine together, and I know there are some challenges. Could you explain a bit about a person with autism and their relationship to food? – **KF, Greenville**

A Thanks for your question, first a shout out to Rose High Rampart Theatre and their production of Time Twister as an autism awareness event last month. The play was written and directed by Ben Craven, a Rose High senior who is on the spectrum and found support in the theatre group. At the end of the play

Ben brought to the stage Jamir, Ragan, Samuel, Isaac, Erin and Cullen who revealed their “superpowers.” Kudos to the teachers involved with the play: Ms. Golebiowski and Ms. Borisoff and East Carolina University student intern who produced Time Twister – Eden Fox.

Kathryn Clary, an ECU medical student will share some insights about autism and nutrition.

For parents of children with autism, mealtime can be a challenge. Many times, people with autism have food aversions that lead to the refusal to eat certain foods because of taste, smell appearance or texture. For some, certain foods may make him or her feel uncomfortable or sick and he or she may even gag or vomit. This causes the person to want to avoid that food or groups of similar foods. Just as you may find smelly trash or body odor disgusting, ordinary foods can cause a similar response in people with autism. Many people with autism also have behavioral issues that stem from this discomfort with foods which can make mealtime difficult. For these reasons, parents and other caregivers worry that their child is not eating a healthy, complete diet.

In a large study at Emory University, researchers found that children with autism are five times more likely to have mealtime problems, such as throwing tantrums, only eating a few types of food, and needing to eat foods in the same exact way or in a certain pattern every time. They also found that poor nutrition was more common in children with autism compared to children without autism. Children with autism had lower calcium and protein intake, both of which are important for growth, building strong bones, and brain development.

We do not fully understand what causes autism, which makes it hard to treat. We do know that good nutrition is important for all children, with or without autism. It is important to eat a variety of foods each with different nutrients to be healthy.

It is important to talk to your pediatrician if you have concerns about your child’s eating habits and before starting a new eating plan. However, here are some ways parents may help their children try new foods:

1. Work with you child’s pediatrician to determine if the limited intake is due to a medical problem or possible food intolerance or food allergy. For example, if your child dislikes cheese because it upsets his stomach or causes diarrhea, this may be due to an intolerance to milk (lactose intolerance). First, it is important to talk to your pediatrician before starting any new food plan.
2. Avoid forcing children to eat foods they show an aversion to as it usually makes it worse. Try starting a conversation about the new food. What does your child like or dislike about the food? What are different ways to eat this food?

3. Try new foods – slowly. New things can be scary, especially new foods. Instead of asking your child to eat the new food right away, start slowly. First, you all can look at the new foods together and talk about the shape, size, color, etc. Then, try smelling the food and touching the food. You may do this for a few meals in a row, until a tomato does not seem as new anymore. When your child is ready, try licking or tasting the food, never forcing the child to eat the entire serving.
4. Serve new with old. Familiar things are not so scary – including favorite foods! If your child likes carrots, serve a new food at the same time – one way to slowly introduce a new food. This helps reduce fear of a new item by associating it with a favorite food.
5. Let your child make the decisions. Let's say tonight you would really like your child to eat a vegetable with his dinner. Instead of demanding that he eats broccoli, give three choices: peas, broccoli, or green beans.
6. Change the texture. For issues with food texture, try changing the texture. For example, while a child may like the flavor of a grape, she may dislike the way it changes from solid to mushy in her mouth. It may help her to squish the grape before eating it, or to cut the grapes in half to avoid the popping sensation when chewing a whole grape.

Thanks to Kay Craven MPH, RDN, LDN at ECU Family Medicine for her review of this article. Professor emeritus Kathy Kolasa, a registered dietitian nutritionist and Ph.D., is an affiliate professor in the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University. Contact her at kolasaka@ecu.edu.

Picky eater vs problem feeder

The STAR Institute is a center that works with people with Sensory Processing Disorders, including autism. They note some important differences between children who are “picky eaters” and children who are “problem feeders”. Here are a few examples:

Picky Eater: Eats smaller range of foods than kids of similar age, but eats 30 or more foods

Problem Feeder: Eats less than 20 foods

Picky Eater: Eats one or more foods from most all nutrition or texture groups

Problem Feeder: Refuses entire categories of food textures or nutrition groups

Picky Eater: Can tolerate new foods on their plate

Problem Feeder: Cries, screams, has tantrums when new foods are on their plate

Picky Eater: Many times, eats different foods at mealtime than other family members; eats at the same table or at the same time as other family members

Problem Feeder: Almost always eats different foods than their family; many times, eats at a different time or at a different place than other family members

Picky Eater: Many children with autism fall into the “problem feeder” category and have greater needs and restrictions than “picky eaters”. There are many books available for “picky eaters”, such as “The Picky Eater Solution”. While these books may help with problems faced by parents of “picky eaters”, these are not meant for children with autism. It is important that parents and other caregivers work with a nutrition specialist (such as a registered dietitian) or health care provider to create a special meal plan for someone with autism. These specialists can help make sure your child is still getting all the nutrients he needs to be healthy.

For more information about caring for an individual with autism, we invite you to visit these websites:

- www.autismspeaks.org; www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html
- www.autism-society.org
- www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/autism
- www.spdstar.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/Picky%20Eaters%20vs%20Problem%20Feeders_0.pdf