

Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Webinar Series:

Feeding Challenges in Young Children with Neurodevelopmental Disorders

Michele Iemolo PsyD, BCBA, R-DMT & Dina Hill, PhD

July 10, 2025

Indian Health Service

TELEBEHAVIORAL HEALTH CENTER OF EXCELLENCE





Introducing the Presenters

Michele Iemolo is a licensed psychologist with experience in the screening, assessment, diagnosis and treatment of children with autism and related neurodevelopmental disabilities. Dr. Iemolo has extensive training and experience in treatment approaches for children and families including applied behavior analysis, dance-movement therapy, as well as parent coaching programs aimed at improving social communication. Dr. Iemolo is professor at New Mexico State University (NMSU) and conducts diagnostic evaluations of children zero to five years of age within NMSU's Autism Diagnostic Center. Dr. Iemolo has a contract with Indian Health Services through UNM to develop and disseminate webinars in the area of neurodevelopmental disorders.

Dina Hill is a licensed clinical neuropsychologist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of children with genetic, neurological, and neurodevelopmental disorders. Over the past seven years, Dr. Hill has worked with the UNM CDD Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) Clinic and on the UNM Center grant investigating the effects of prenatal exposure on the developing child. Dr. Hill has a contract with Indian Health Services through UNM to develop and disseminate webinars in the area of neurodevelopmental disorders.



Disclosure Statement

Disclosure Statement: As a jointly accredited provider of continuing education, the IHS Clinical Support Center must ensure balance, independence, objectivity, and scientific rigor in its educational activities. Course directors/coordinators, planning committee members, faculty, reviewers and all others who are in a position to control the content of this educational activity are required to disclose the existence of all financial relationships with ineligible companies within the prior 24 months. Safeguards against commercial bias have been put in place. Faculty will also disclose any off-label and/or investigational use of pharmaceuticals or instruments discussed in their presentation. All those who are in a position to control the content of this educational activity have completed the disclosure process and have indicated that they do not have any relevant financial relationships or affiliations with any manufacturers or commercial products to disclose.

There is no commercial interest support for this educational activity.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this presentation are those of the speaker and do not necessarily represent the views, policies, and positions of the Indian Health Service (IHS), or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Feeding Challenges in Young Children with Neurodevelopmental Disorders



This webinar will focus on developing healthcare teams' skills in identifying possible underlining causes and/or factors that can contribute to feeding challenges in children with Neurodevelopmental Disorders (NDDs), distinguish between “picky eating” and an eating disorder, and compare and contrast common intervention approaches to address the feeding challenges that children with NDDs face. Teaching tools will include a resource page and a quick facts for healthcare teams.



Objectives

At the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Examine possible underlying causes and/or factors that can contribute to feeding challenges in children with Neurodevelopmental Disorders (NDDs).
2. Distinguish between “picky eating” and eating disorders.
3. Compare and contrast common intervention approaches to address the feeding challenges that children with NDDs face.

Neurodevelopmental Disorders



- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) & other externalizing disorders
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Intellectual Developmental Disorder
- Speech/Language Disorders
- Learning Disorders
- Movement Disorders
- Genetic Disorders/Medical Conditions

Objective 1:

Examine possible underlying causes and/or factors that can contribute to feeding challenges in children with Neurodevelopmental Disorders (NDDs).

Your Own Food Experiences



- Least favorite food(s) in childhood?
- Reason (sensory, hard to chew, makes you feel bad...)
- How can this create empathy?



What's Typical?

- Food neophobia a normal stage of development between 2 and 6 years of age.
- Picky eating/neophobia peaks between 18-24 months.
- May take 10-15 presentations of a new food before a child will eat it.
(Neurodivergent children may need additional and different approaches)

*Permission to share from: Osana Abich Oliva, MD, Erin Smith, RD LD, and Meg McLaughlin, MS, OTR/L.
Center for Development and Disabilities, UNM*

Relevant Feeding Statistics



NDDs in General

- 30 -90% of children with special needs (and/or NDDs) (Rabaey, 2001)
- Majority of children with ID, ASD, ADHD, SLD & Cerebral palsy have (Verma, Dey, Sehgal, Journal of Neurosciences in Rural Practice, October 2024)

Intellectual Developmental Disorder (Intellectual Disability)

- 47% of children with developmental delays presented with pediatric feeding problems
- 66.7% of parents experienced challenges during mealtime
- 56% of parents considered feeding behavior problematic

Autism

- 60% of children with ASD were “picky eaters”
- 69% of children with ASD wouldn’t try new foods
- Nearly 32% of Adolescents with ASD are considered Obese with 57% at higher risk for developing diabetes than people without ASD (CDC)

Relevant Feeding Statistics



Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

- 20% of children with ADHD develop eating disorders (Villa, Journal of Affective Disorders, 2023)
- “Disruptive patterns of eating behaviors, metabolically unfavorable nutritional status, and diminished physical activities of male children diagnosed with ADHD are linked to compromised growth and development and appearance of metabolic diseases in adulthood” (Ptacek, 2014, Medical Science Monitor).

Speech Language Disorders (SLDs)

- 62% of children with SLDs presented with feeding-swallowing difficulties (FSDs) (Malas, 2015 Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology)

Possible Underlying Causes/Factors Impacting Feeding Challenges in Children with NDDs



- Gastrointestinal problems
- Sensory processing difficulties/aversions
 - Smell, touch, visual, taste
- Oral sensory hypersensitivity
 - Uncomfortable with touch to mouth
- Anxiety/fear
 - Anxiety when presented with new food
 - Not wanting to eat in front of other people
 - A fear of choking or vomiting
- Social Skill Deficits/Differences
 - Decreased response to instructions/following instructions
 - Less imitation skills

Possible Underlying Causes/Factors Impacting Feeding Challenges in Children with NDDs



- Language Delays/Differences
- Difficulty with Transitions or Novel Situations
 - Preference for routines and/or sameness
- Fine motor challenges/adaptive functioning
- Attention/Self-Regulation
- Difficulty recognizing internal sensations

Red Flags



- **Sensory/Motor**

- Limited diet due to eating only one texture or flavor
- Completely avoids touching food or plays with food instead of eating
- Not using utensils (at least trying and making progress) by age 2
- Poor postural control

- **Medical**

- Coughing, choking, gagging, vomiting, history of pneumonia
- Makes loud breathing noises? Turns blue? Becomes worn out before the end of feedings?
- Appetite changes?
- Allergic reactions?
- Constipation? Diarrhea?
- GERD? Arching back? Hoarse voice?

*Permission to share from: Osana Abich Oliva, MD, Erin Smith, RD LD, and Meg McLaughlin, MS, OTR/L.
Center for Development and Disabilities, UNM*

Red Flags



Growth/Nutritional

- $>95^{\text{th}}$ % or $<5^{\text{th}}$ % weight-for-age, or crosses 3 major percentile groups
- Does not triple birthweight by age 1
- Declines in length/stature-for-age percentile
- Is on special diet: e.g., milk allergy - are they getting calcium?
- Misses certain food groups: e.g., no meats, fortified grains, or legumes – are they getting adequate iron?
- Notes: Head circumference is *not* affected by feeding problems. Make sure child is plotted on appropriate growth chart (i.e. Down syndrome, cerebral palsy)

*Permission to share from: Osana Abich Oliva, MD, Erin Smith, RD LD, and Meg McLaughlin, MS, OTR/L.
Center for Development and Disabilities, UNM*

Objective 2:

Distinguish between “picky eating” and eating disorders.

Terms and Definitions



- **Picky eating or Disordered Eating:** Not uncommon in children, typically is outgrown/not prolonged.
- **Eating Disorders:**
 - Pica
 - Rumination Disorder
 - Anorexia Nervosa
 - Bulimia Nervosa
 - Binge Eating Disorder
 - Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)

Picky Eating Vs. ARFID



1. Sudden or significant weight loss
2. Failure to gain or maintain weight
3. Interference with psychosocial functioning
4. Sensory sensitivities
5. Adverse consequences
6. Lack of Interest in food or eating

<https://www.waldeneatingdisorders.com/blog/6-differences-between-picky-eating-and-avoidant-restrictive-food-intake-disorder-arfid/>



Associated Health Risks with ARFID

- Stomach cramps and other digestive complaints
- Intolerance to cold
- Irregular or absent menstrual cycles
- Trouble concentrating/cognitive impairment
- Dizziness and fainting
- Sleep problems
- Fatigue
- Constipation
- Dry skin
- Hair loss
- Low blood pressure
- Rapid heartbeat

Objective 3:

Compare and contrast common intervention approaches to address the feeding challenges that children with NDDs face

Red Flags ? -> Using Your Resources



- Consult with pediatrician on red flags (they may address, or refer to GI, allergist, or other specialists)
- Add OT, SLP, or PT to EI Team when needed
- Pediatric dietitian (some available to consult for EI agencies)
- Pediatric dentist
- Lactation consultant
- Outpatient feeding therapy

*Permission to share from: Osana Abich Oliva, MD, Erin Smith, RD LD, and Meg McLaughlin, MS, OTR/L.
Center for Development and Disabilities, UNM*

General Rules of Thumb



- Rule-out medical issues
- Psycho-education
- Caregiver or family involvement and support
- Shop, cook and eat together
- Offer “safe” foods
- Regular mealtimes
- Include a preferred food with new foods
- Introduce new foods slowly and multiple times
- Model eating new food
- Be patient (with child and yourself!)

Intervention Approaches

Environment:

- Creating a Positive Environment/Make eating fun!
- Seating
- Utensils, plates, cups, place mats, etc.



Intervention Approaches



Sensory:

- Involve the other senses
- Consider Sensory aversions/sensitivities
 - Sight, sound, taste, texture, temperature and odor

Intervention Program



Walden Behavioral Care (A Monte Nido Affiliate)

ARFID intervention program:

- Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP)
- 10-week, virtual program
- 10-18 years of age (and their families)
- CBT-AR: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy- Avoidance/Restrictive

<https://www.montenido.com/what-we-treat/arfid>

A scenic landscape featuring a calm lake in the middle ground, surrounded by a dense forest of trees with autumn foliage in shades of green, yellow, and brown. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. In the foreground, there are dark, bare tree branches on the left and a tree trunk on the right. A large white circle is centered over the image, containing the word "Questions" in a dark blue, sans-serif font.

Questions



Resources/References: Providers & Families

- Sensory Processing Resources Autism Research Institute (<https://autism.org/sensory-processing-resources/>)
- Sensory Resources MIND Institute Resources (<https://health.ucdavis.edu/mind-institute/resources/sensory>)
- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/exploring-feeding-behavior-autism>
- [https://www.additudemag.com/webinar/picky-eater-spd-adhd-podcast-355/Sensory Processing Information for Parents](https://www.additudemag.com/webinar/picky-eater-spd-adhd-podcast-355/Sensory-Processing-Information-for-Parents) (chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Sensory-Processing-booklet-for-parents.pdf)
- <https://withinhealth.com/learn/articles/understanding-picky-eaters>
- <https://www.montenido.com/what-we-treat/arfid>
- <https://www.kennedykrieger.org/stories/interactive-autism-network-ian/feeding-problems-children-autism>
- <https://ruralneuropractice.com/exploring-behavioral-pediatric-feeding-problems-and-parental-perceptions-among-children-with-developmental-disabilities/#ref5>
- <https://ruralneuropractice.com/view-pdf/?article=7a8ba0cc8a0afbdfcd1266033f69ab8y61XTgJ9K/4R7Q==>
- <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3999164/#:~:text=ADHD%20children%20frequently%20skip%20meals,less%20regularly%2C%20but%20more%20often.>
- <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3999164/#:~:text=ADHD%20children%20frequently%20skip%20meals,less%20regularly%2C%20but%20more%20often.>

Quick Facts for Providers



Possible Underlying Causes/Factors Impacting Feeding Challenges in Children with NDDs

1. Gastrointestinal Problems
2. Sensory process difficulties/aversions
3. Oral Sensory hypersensitivity
4. Anxiety/fear
5. Social skill deficits/differences
6. Language delays/differences
7. Difficulties with transitions or novel situations
8. Fine motor challenges/adaptive functioning
9. Attention/self-regulation
10. Difficulty recognizing internal sensations

General Rules of Thumb

1. Rule-out medical issues
2. Psycho-education
3. Caregiver or family involvement and support
4. Shop, cook and eat together
5. Offer “safe” foods
6. Regular mealtimes
7. Include a preferred food with new foods
8. Introduce new foods slowly and multiple times
9. Model eating new food
10. Be patient (with child and yourself!)

Picky Eating vs. ARFID

1. Sudden or significant weight loss
2. Failure to gain or maintain weight
3. Interference with psychosocial functioning
4. Sensory Sensitivities
5. Adverse Consequences
6. Lack of Interest in Food or Eating

Intervention approaches

Environment:

1. Creating a Positive Environment/Make eating fun!
2. Seating
3. Utensils, plates, cups, place mats, etc.

Sensory:

1. Involve the other senses
2. Consider Sensory aversions/sensitivities
3. Sight, sound, taste, texture, temperature and odor



IHS Previous Webinars

<https://www.ihs.gov/teleeducation/webinar-archives/>



Consultation Clinic

Office hours for providers:

One-on-one consultation with Drs. Hill and Lemolo

Contact us at:

dhill@salud.unm.edu or miemolo@nmsu.edu



Presenter Contact Information

**Dina E. Hill, PhD,
Professor, University of New Mexico.
dhill@salud.unm.edu,
505-272-5106**

**Michele Iemolo, PsyD, BCBA, R-DMT,
Professor, New Mexico State University.
miemolo@nmsu.edu,
575-646-3177**

