

# Barriers and Facilitators to Providing Nutrition Care for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Findings from a Qualitative Study of Interdisciplinary Medical Professionals

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## BACKGROUND

Nutrition is a crucial factor for optimal neurodevelopment and growth throughout the childhood age span. The number of children among the autism spectrum developing nutrition-related challenges is increasing.

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are at a particular risk for nutrition-related challenges, yet **few studies address the quality of nutrition care given by interdisciplinary medical professionals to this population.**



## METHODS

- Semi-structured interviews** assessed the perceptions of n=21 interdisciplinary medical professionals
- Interview guide assessed **barriers, facilitators, and the necessary qualifications to providing effective nutrition care for children on the autism spectrum**
- Interviews were transcribed, double-coded using constant comparative methods, and summarized into themes using NVivo 12.

Characteristics	Participants (n=21)
Parent	
Sex	
Female	17 (81%)
Male	4 (19%)
Profession	
Board-Certified Behavior Analyst	5 (24%)
Occupational Therapist	5 (24%)
Pediatrician (all)	7 (33%)
Developmental Pediatrician (specialist)	3 (14%)
Speech-Language Pathologist	4 (19%)
Total years of experience as a medical professional	12
Total years of experience working with children with ASD	12
Percent of children served with ASD diagnosis	(52 %)
Part of an interdisciplinary team with a registered dietitian	
Yes	4 (19%)
No	17 (81%)

## RESULTS

### Medical professional's barriers for providing nutrition care



#### Cognitive factor

Personal lack of knowledge and training  
Belief that specific medical professionals are not educated enough

*"I definitely feel like our basic training as behavior analysts do not prepare us for that area [nutrition] of application. (ID# 230, board-certified behavior analyst, female)"*



#### Behavioral factor

Not addressing the topic due to lack of time  
Competing priorities

*"You only see a kid for fifty minutes, once or twice a week... there's only so much you can do, in terms of recommending and hoping that it happens." (ID# 215, occupational therapist, female).  
"Because I think a lot of us already have large scopes of practice and like that's such an important aspect, yet we just don't have time." (ID# 218, speech-language pathologist, female).*



#### Environmental factor

Parental limitations  
(minimal health literacy, low financial status, lack of accessible resources, busy schedules)  
Parents don't carry out interventions at home

*"I would say that parents are mixed in terms of how much they can take in, knowledge-wise... Parents are overwhelmed with information, scheduling, and the financial burden of having a child with autism. (ID #214, speech-language pathologist, female)"*

*There's definitely a lack of nutrition and feeding therapy services available, both privately and through the Regional Center covered care services. Even if parents are willing and wanting to put in the work, a lot of times there's not the service available to guide them. (ID #222, pediatrician, female)"*

## RESULTS

### Medical professional's facilitators for providing nutrition care



#### Successful experiences

Simplifying recommendations  
Flexibility  
Patience

*"Just picking one part, rather than saying they need to eat better, because that gets be very overwhelming. I think that trying to break it down for parents usually makes it less daunting and makes them more able to grasp and practice what it is we talk about in the office at home." (ID# 222, pediatrician, female).*



#### Positive view of nutrition care

Helpful to have a dietitian/nutritionist on the team of a child with ASD

*I think it would be incredibly helpful to have like a registered dietitian or nutritionist on the autism kiddos team. I think like having them educate us so we can educate parents would be fantastic or like direct education." (ID# 218, speech-language pathologist, female)*



#### Use of a referral

Referrals for nutritional deficiencies, food restrictions, food rigidity, growth concerns  
Referrals to a pediatric gastroenterologist or nutritionist

*"If I'm really concerned about a nutritional deficiency in a child... I would definitely make sure that they, you know, get very quick follow up with their pediatrician [general] and get a referral out as needed to like a pediatric gastroenterologist and a nutritionist." (ID# 235, pediatrician, male).*



#### Type of medical professional support

Multidisciplinary team  
(behavioral therapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, dietitians, pediatricians, psychologists)

*"So for myself, I always try to bring a whole team on board... and so usually along with a registered dietitian, sometimes I involve the gastroenterologist myself as an OT and a speech therapist too." (ID #224, occupational therapist, female)*

### Qualifications identified by medical professionals to provide effective nutrition care

Training	Developmental pediatrics, autism, nutrition, dietetics
Education	Child development, autism, nutrition, oral-motor issues, sensory issues, feeding and swallowing, behaviors, family dynamics
Exposure	Subspecialty in developmental behavioral pediatrics, sibling with autism
Other feedback about qualifications	Being a parent, social emotional regulation, using family-centered and child-centered language

Most medical professionals described pediatricians as the providers most capable of offering nutrition-related care to children with ASD.

*"I definitely think it should be a trained professional, really, like a pediatrician, that works with the family, that has a background in dietetics."*



## CONCLUSIONS

### Medical professionals serving children with ASD lack awareness and training about nutrition needs and resources for their patients.

Future research must identify practical ways to:

- Equip medical professionals of an interdisciplinary team
- Develop nutrition care evidenced based guidelines for children with ASD
- Enhance availability of nutrition-related resources

