

Interdisciplinary Medical Professional and Parent Perspectives about Registered Dietitian Nutritionists' Roles in Providing Nutrition Care to Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Katie Cheng, Rachel Blaine DSc., Cynthia Banuelos, Harmony Crawford, Michelle Barrack PhD., Brooke Dekofsky MPH



Department of Family and Consumer Sciences
College of Health and Human Services, California State University, Long Beach

BACKGROUND

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often exhibit nutrition-related challenges such as picky eating, sensory abnormalities, negative mealtimes behaviors, and gastrointestinal issues

Despite the many nutritional-challenges children on the spectrum may experience, **there is limited research about the role of registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) supporting this population of children.**



METHODS

- Semi-structured interviews** assessed the perceptions of n=21 medical professionals. (i.e., board certified behavior analysts, occupational therapists, pediatricians, and speech-language pathologists) with experience working directly with children on the spectrum, as well as n=22 parents of children with ASD aged 3-15 years.
- The interview guide assessed **perceptions about the role of RDNs providing nutrition care to children on the spectrum from hypothetical feelings, experiences, and referrals.** Participants were also asked to identify nutrition-related topics of interest and desired resources.
- Interviews were transcribed, double-coded using constant comparative methods, and summarized into themes using NVivo 12.

Characteristic	Participants (n=21)
Medical Professional	
Female	17 (81%)
White	15 (71%)
Board certified behavior analyst	5 (24%)
Occupational therapist	5 (24%)
Pediatrician	7 (33%)
Speech-language pathologist	4 (19%)
Provides care in outpatient medical facility	8 (38%)
Part of interdisciplinary team with RDN	4 (19%)
Experience working with children with ASD (yrs)	12 (9)

Characteristic	Participants (n=22)
Parent	
Mother	18 (82%)
Hispanic	11 (50%)
Completed some college education/beyond	18 (82%)
Employed for wages	10 (46%)
Child	
Age (yrs)	6.8 (3.4)
Male	18 (82%)

RESULTS

Key themes from interviews with medical professionals and parents of children with ASD



Medical Professional Perceptions about RDNs

- Most perceived RDNs as helpful
- Some expressed mixed feelings questioning ASD education and training

"I think it depends on the dietitian and if they understand this population, these kids and their unique feeding challenges versus someone that just knows nutrition." (Developmental Pediatrician)



Parent Perceptions about RDNs

- Few perceived RDNs as helpful
- Most expressed mixed feelings or perceived RDNs as unhelpful

"I don't think they'll be really helpful; it needs to be someone who's very behaviorally aware and also brave enough to deal with severe behaviors." (Mother of son with ASD)

RESULTS



Medical Professionals on Topic of Referrals to RDNs

- Seldom referred to RDNs
- Due to lack of referral resources & RDN contact information

VS

Parents on Referrals on Topic of Referrals to RDNs

- Nearly all parents shared their child was never referred to an RDN despite child exhibiting nutrition-related challenge



Medical Professional Experiences with RDNs

- Majority have not worked with RDNs
- Most experiences with RDNs mentioned were positive

"I'm really lucky we have RDNs in house, I definitely feel very lost without them." (Occupational therapist)
"I've worked with them in the hospital and they're really, really helpful." (Occupational therapist)

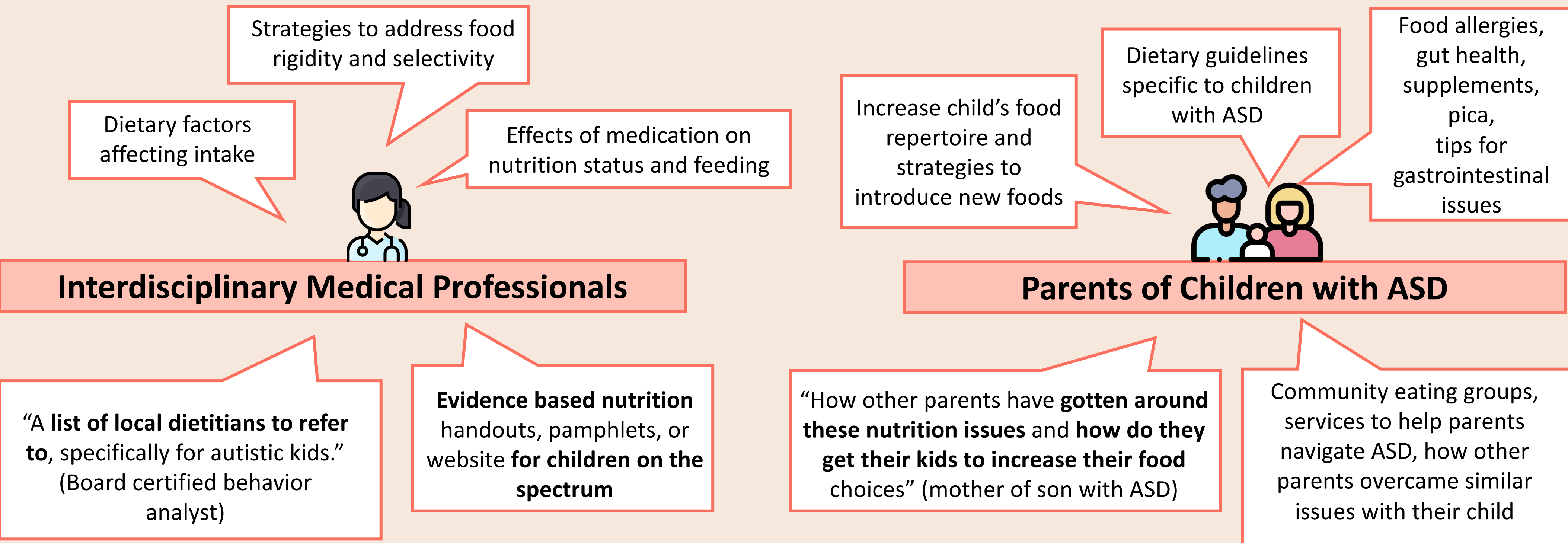


Parent Experiences with RDNs

- Only one parent mentioned her son's experience with RDN
- Nearly all parents had no experiences with RDNs

"The RDN was for adults, there are just no specialists for kids on the spectrum. And no, I don't think my son's nutrition-related concerns were taken seriously." (Mother of son with ASD)

Topics of Interest for Nutrition-Related Educational Resources & Types of Resources Needed



CONCLUSION

Despite facing nutrition-related challenges, medical professionals rarely referred children with ASD to RDNs.

To effectively address nutrition challenges of children on the spectrum, increase services, and evidence-based resources the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics should consider:

- increasing visibility of the profession
- encouraging professional interest
- promoting training programs and resources for RDNs interested in providing care to the ASD population

