

Title : Prevalence of feeding difficulties in children with special needs.

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Introduction:

Feeding difficulties are a major concern for children with special needs as it affects their daily living in many ways and is a significant barrier to their normal growth and development (1). Feeding difficulties were defined as picky eating, food selectivity, sensory sensitivity, poor oral motor coordination, position of feeding and aversive behaviours towards certain foods (1,2,3).

Methodology:

The purpose of this study in children with special needs was to retrospectively explore the i. Prevalence of feeding difficulties ii. Investigate the nature of the feeding difficulties and iii. Investigate the effect of feeding difficulties on weight status of the child. A retrospective study was carried out at Nutrition OPD across 3 centres of Sneh RERC in Mumbai. In total 52 nutritional assessment forms were reviewed for the study.

Results:

The children came with varied conditions such as Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, Cerebral Palsy (CP), William syndrome, West syndrome and delayed milestones. Out of the 52 children with special needs, 42 children (81%) reported having feeding difficulties, 6 (11%) did not report any feeding difficulty and in case of 4 children (7%) the question was left blank. It was observed that children exhibited preference for soft-semisolid (50%) food followed by liquid consistency (6%) and crunchy or crispy (24%) consistency with only 20% children preferring all textures of food. This highly restricts the intake of variety of foods as a result of which children with special needs fail to meet the nutrient requirements. It was observed that the feeding behaviours in the children were also affected by certain extraneous factors such as parents having difficulty in managing the child's challenging behaviour, lack of time to attend to the child and ease of feeding in children with poor oral and motor coordination for eg: parents found it easier to feed liquid and semi-solid foods to children in supine condition. The feeding difficulties faced in children with special needs had a negative impact on the weight status of these children. Out of 52 children, 27 (52%) children were underweight, 6 (12%) were overweight, about 14 (27%) children were near normal weight and weight for 5 (9%) children was not recorded. Body weight can be used as an indicator of health in children and underweight and overweight children may suffer from several nutritional deficiencies as well. Further studies are warranted to assess the nutritional status of these children.

Conclusion:

Feeding difficulties is a very common problem in children with special needs affecting almost 81% children in the above study. Considering the nature of feeding difficulties, a multi-disciplinary approach involving a registered dietitian, doctor, physiotherapist and occupational therapist is required to deal with the feeding difficulties in children with special needs.

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