

# HEALTHY HABIT CHALLENGES

for Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

**By learning about the challenges they face, you are taking an important step towards helping children with I/DD develop healthy behaviors!**



Many children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) have difficulty eating healthy foods and being physically active. They face many of the same challenges as typically developing children, as well as additional challenges and risk factors for obesity. Below is a list of some of the healthy eating and physical activity challenges faced by children with I/DD.

## Healthy Eating Challenges<sup>1-5</sup>

### Eating Problems

Children with developmental disabilities are more likely to have eating problems than typically developing children. These may include:

- Selective or “choosy” eating
- Sensitivity to texture, color, smell, temperature, or brands of certain foods
- Unusual or ritualistic eating patterns
- Preference for foods that are high in calories and low in nutrients

### Oral-Motor Problems

Some children with developmental disabilities have oral-motor problems that can affect their ability to chew and swallow food. These children prefer softer foods which may be highly processed and less nutritious.

### Caloric Needs

Children with certain developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome, may have lower caloric needs. It can be hard to limit caloric intake in environments where unhealthy foods are prevalent.

### Food Rewards

Food rewards, which tend to be high in sugar and calories, are often used to reinforce desired behavior in special education.

### Mealtime Behavior

Children with I/DD often have difficult behavior at mealtimes. This can make it more challenging to eat together as a family. This is a concern because studies show that children who regularly eat with their families are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables.

### Self-Awareness

Children with I/DD may not understand the health risks and other consequences associated with poor diet and lack of physical activity.



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continued

## Physical Activity Challenges<sup>1,3,6,7</sup>

### Functional Limitations

Children with I/DD may have limitations that serve as barriers to being physically active, including:

- Tiring more easily
- Mobility issues
- Different social and communication needs
- Behavioral challenges
- Need for close supervision or support

### Inclusivity

Including children with I/DD in physical education programs may require adaptation. If instructors do not make the necessary program adaptations, or lack necessary equipment, children with I/DD may be left out.

### Attitudes

When the emphasis of an activity is on competition and winning, children with I/DD may be excluded from group activities and team sports.

### Self-Monitoring

Children with I/DD may have difficulty with self-monitoring. For example, a child may struggle to keep up a certain level of intensity while exercising. This means they may have trouble meeting daily recommendations for moderate to vigorous physical activity.

### Safety Concerns

Families of children with I/DD often have concerns about their child's safety or risk of injury and may restrict their child's participation in sports in order to protect them.



**The Let's Go! Toolkit for Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities includes tools to help address many of these healthy eating and physical activity challenges faced by children with I/DD.**

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- 2 Manno CJ, Fox C, Eicher P, and Kerwin ML. Early Oral-Motor Interventions for Pediatric Feeding Problems: What, When and How. *Journal of Early and Intensive Behavior Intervention*. Fall 2005;Vol. 2, (Issue 3): 145-159.
- 3 Must A., Curtin C, Hubbard K., Sikich L., et al. Obesity Prevention for Children with Developmental Disabilities. *Current Obesity Report*. 2014;Vol 3 (Issue 2):156-170.
- 4 Hammons A, Fiese B. Is Frequency of Shared Family Meals Related to the Nutritional Health of Children and Adolescents? *Pediatrics*. 2011;Vol 127 (Issue 6): e1565–e1574.
- 5 Gillman MV, Rifas-Shiman SL, Frazier AL, Rockett HR, Camargo CA Jr, Field AE, Berkey CS, Colditz GA. Family dinner and diet quality among older children and adolescents. *Archives of Family Medicine*. 2000;Vol 9 (Issue 3):235-240.
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- 7 Rimmer J, Rowland J, Yamaki K. Obesity and Secondary Conditions in Adolescents with Disabilities: Addressing the Needs of an Underserved Population. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2007, 41:224-229.