

Exploring the Impact of Selective Eating on Key Life Domains Among Transition-Age Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Background

- Mealtimes provide social opportunities and can affect general well-being.
- Selective eating, common among youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), may impact mealtime experiences.
- No systematic studies to date have queried youths themselves about their experiences with selective eating.

Methods

Design & Participants

20 in-depth interviews with transition-age youth (18-23 years) with ASD

Interview Guide & Procedures

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to discuss:

- The impact of selective eating on mealtimes with family, activities with peers, and other social situations
- Feelings about selective eating and interest in support

Analysis

- Descriptive and thematic coding of interviews using NVivo (QSR Int'l, v. 12)

Results

Participant Characteristics

- Mean age 21 years (SD 1.7 years)
- 14 male, 4 female, 1 transgender, 1 non-binary
- Living situation: 13 at home with parents; 5 at school; 2 with a roommate
- All white

THEME: Strategies for Coping with Selective Eating in Social Situations: Picking out disliked foods, reviewing menu ahead of time, eating ahead of time, focusing on preferred foods, carrying snacks, eating enough of disliked foods to avoid hunger, occasionally going hungry.
"Every time I see it I, I usually do what I can to remove it... Yeah, it's just like a surgeon trying to remove unwanted things to save the person's life."
"I would probably either eat beforehand or just not eat at the event, basically. I might even bring my own food, honestly, if that's possible."



THEME: Selective Eating Diminished with Age: Perception that this resulted from gentle pressure from parents or themselves, or the passage of time.
"They asked me to try stuff and as I got older I got to take a chance on some stuff, so it was a mix of both things, first my parents at the beginning and now I've become more willing to test things out."

THEME: Response from Family and Peers to Food Selectivity: Accommodating but not necessarily understanding.
"...they're not really judging, just they're kind of accepting of it. Maybe they don't fully understand it..."

THEME: Abilities and Need for Help: Most felt able to manage social situations involving eating and were not especially interested in receiving help
"I don't think it's much of a problem anymore."

Conclusions

- Transition-age youth have developed coping strategies to manage social situations involving food.
- A responsive, supportive approach would involve:
 - Recognizing skills youth have already developed
 - Respecting their growing autonomy
 - Potentially involving a peer support network with other youth with ASD who understand the challenges and can share helpful strategies.

Funding

- Deborah Munroe Noonan Memorial Research Fund
- A cooperative agreement (# UA3MC25735) with the Maternal and Child Health Research Program, Health Resources and Services Administration – the Healthy Weight Research Network