Strategies Parents use to Support Their Child’s Participation During Family Mealtimes
Tanis E. Rusin, OTS & Karla Ausderau, PhD, OTR/L

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PROGRAM, DEPARTMENT OF KINESIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Introduction

- Children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have more significant feeding challenges than typically developing children.
- When a child presents with feeding challenges during mealtimes it impacts the entire family by creating tension, disrupting mealtime routines, and consequently increasing parental stress.
- Strategies (e.g. encouragement and allowing the child the option to not eat with others) have been identified from the literature as ways caregivers support children’s mealtime participation.
- Interventions described in the literature have not included parent perspective on the types of techniques they use to encourage mealtime participation of their child with ASD.

Study Purpose

- The purpose of this study was to review video taken during family mealtimes of families with a child diagnosed with ASD and who presents with feeding challenges.
- Hypothesis: four pre-determined strategies applied by families aimed at promoting their child’s participation during family mealtimes will be observed in video recorded mealtimes of families with a child with ASD. The predetermined strategies are:
  - Parents will Encourage Child to Engage with Food in Non-Traditional Ways.
  - Parents will Provide Distractions During Mealtimes.
  - Parents will not Require Child to Sit at the Dining Table while the Child Eats.
  - Parents will Give Child the Option of Not Participating in the Act of Eating while the Rest of the Family Eats.

Research Design & Methods

- Design: Adapted thematic approach using observation of videos of family mealtimes
- Participants: A convenience sample of five families of male children diagnosed with ASD and who present with feeding challenges. English speakers, ages 4-8.
- Procedures and Analysis:
  - Families were videotaped 1-2 times in their home during mealtimes. Average meal lasted 20 minutes.
  - Nvivo software used for analysis of video and narrative data.
  - Figure 1 illustrates the adapted thematic analysis used.

Stage 1

- Review Mealtimes Videos
- Identify and Refine Emerging Themes
- Discuss Observed Themes with Research Team
- Label & Define Themes

Stage 2

Stage 3

Results

- Two out of four predetermined strategies were observed, Parents will Encourage Child to Engage with Food in Non-Traditional Ways and Parents will Provide Distractions during Mealtimes. These strategies were deemed more appropriate as sub themes to the overarching novel theme of Engage with Child During Mealtimes.
- Two additional themes that were not predetermined, Model Good Eating Habits and Environmental Adaptations, were identified. An additional sub theme was also observed, Engage using Mealtime Routines.

Conclusions

- The hypothesis was supported by observation of two predetermined strategies including: Encourage Child to Engage with Food in Non-Traditional Ways and Provide Distractions. Strategies to promote desired behaviors in children with ASD that include encouragement are present in the literature.
- The predetermined strategies of Parents will not Require Child to Sit at the Dining Table while the Child Eats and Parents will Give Child the Option of Not Participating in the Act of Eating while the Rest of the Family Eats were not observed, which does not support the hypothesis.
- Instead parent participants applied strategies that aligned with their child’s preferences and behaviors.

Implications for Practice

- Parents are the experts on their child’s distinctive abilities, preferences, and behaviors. Many of the observed feeding strategies applied by parents during family mealtimes catered to these factors.
- Use of a family centered care approach would be optimal because the expertise of parents would be utilized in developing a feeding intervention for their child with ASD.

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References