Title: Parent Strategies to Support Mealtime Participation for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Introduction: Mealtime, an important family occupation, is significantly affected in families with children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) as they report significant mealtime behaviors, increased focus on the child with ASD, disrupted eating patterns, and an overall increased level of stress (Ausderau & Juarez, 2013; Marquenie, Rodger, Mangohig, & Cronin, 2011; Nadon, Feldman, Dunn, & Gisel, 2011). The typical structure of mealtimes places significant demands on the social-communication skills, behavioral rigidity, and sensory processing deficits that are the core characteristics of ASD. Families use a number of strategies to support their child with ASD’s engagement in mealtime, but these strategies have not yet been clearly identified. The purpose of this study was to identify strategies parents implement to support their child’s participation in mealtime occupations.

Method: Twelve families with a child between the ages of 2 and 7 years with ASD were recruited to participate in 1 to 2 videotaped mealtime observations. Videos were reviewed to identify strategies families used during mealtimes to facilitate participation. The strategies were identified, defined, and arranged into categories using qualitative conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The categories were used to develop coding schemes with detailed definitions that were used to code family mealtime videos with each video being coded independently by two research team members. Agreement measures of inter-rater reliability were calculated.

Results: Six unique categories of strategies were identified: 1) Parent Intervening and Ignoring, 2) Meal Preparation and Adaptability, 3) Positive Reinforcements, 4) Play and Imagination, 5) Distractions, and 6) Modeling. In addition, just over half of the families integrated props (common child objects) into their mealtime. Families used multiple strategies within and across mealtimes with variable success, highlighting the individualistic nature of feeding challenges. The strategies often focused on negative behavior management and overall child regulation. The goal of the child at least partially participating in the family meal was often achieved, but rarely promoted the parents’ desired eating behavior for the child.

Discussion: In the context of everyday mealtime occupations, parents’ strategies were often about shared time and space versus shared food or promoting new eating behaviors. Mealtime strategies identified in this study provide an emerging framework for practitioners to discuss strategies families are currently using, their purpose, perceived success, and potential disadvantages that can guide intervention. Understanding parental mealtime strategies allows for further investigation into the efficacy and development of family-centered intervention strategies for promoting mealtime participation for children with ASD.

References/Citations: