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COMMUNICATION

The Social ‘Nutrition’ Behind Healthy Kids with Special Needs

BY KAREN KABAKI-SISTO, M.S. CCC-SLP

It's a new year, and a lot of us vow to eat healthier and exercise more as we realize its importance to our well-being. However, some children with special needs may view good health and fitness as tedious, punishing tasks that are forced upon them. With the right types of communication and social interaction, you as the parent can create a new way of life with your child that has long-lasting benefits.

FOOD

Giving your child the power to choose, shop for, and prepare some meals. These activities may give him or her a better understanding which could grow into a preference to eat healthy foods more often.

MY PLATE IS GREAT!

With your child, search through magazines for pictures of different food categories like vegetables, meats, and fruits. Explain the language behind more complex words like ‘dairy’ and ‘grain’ by giving common examples of them (cheese/yogurt; rice/bread, etc.). Have your child think of and find pictures of other examples. Label these food categories on different paper plates and bowls, and then glue the pictures.

WELCOME TO JOHNNY'S RESTAURANT!

Now that your child understands the names and categories of foods, with your guidance, he can create new recipes, unique food combinations and different ways to prepare foods using these ideas:

- *Perhaps your child enjoys French fries but is afraid to try a baked or mashed potato, even though they are all the same food in different forms. To help your child realize how a simple potato can transform into many delicious foods, cook several potato variations with his help and broaden his tastes along the way.*
- *The next time you're preparing a meal, have your child join you to observe and get inspired to create her own recipes. Show her all the different ways items can be cut, and use language such as “diced / chopped / julienned / crinkle cut.” Further demonstrate how foods can be cooked, such as, “grilled / boiled / baked / raw.” These concepts can inspire her to spend more time with you in the kitchen and create her own recipes. Encourage her to choose a “color of the day” and pick out a healthy food to be prepared the way she prefers (e.g., “purple - eggplant - sliced and baked”; “tan - chicken - grilled”).*

“AISLE” DO IT MYSELF!

With your child, make a grocery list of all the food items neces-



ASPIRE TO INSPIRE: The next time you're preparing a meal, have your child join you to observe and get inspired to create her own recipes. This can inspire her to spend more time with you in the kitchen and create her own recipes.

sary for a meal. When you both go to the supermarket, he can further use his language skills to figure out the aisle that contains what he needs (e.g., 'milk' within the 'dairy' aisle; 'chicken' within the 'meat' aisle).

YUCK OR YUM

While preparing the food and at the dinner table, you can model positive statements to encourage your child to try different food items:

- "Mmmm...take a whiff. This smells so delicious."
- "This soup is filled with healthy, yummy vegetables."
- "This julienned squash looks just like French fries, but I like the way these 'squash fries' taste better than French fries."
- "I didn't think I would like the taste of this turnip, but it's really terrific."

Of course, it is important to allow your child to share his opinion even if it's not positive.

TOO MUCH, TOO LITTLE, JUST RIGHT!

Help your child develop accurate measures for portion control in order to eat treats like cookies, cake, chips, and candies more responsibly. With these foods, fill a side plate, saucer, or shot glass to demonstrate how much quantity that words like "few / some / a little bit" actually mean. To enjoy beverages in moderation, mark a

fill-line on the outside of paper or plastic cups.

At mealtime on a divided paper dish, have your child write the food category to be filled within each meal (e.g., meat; grain) so that she can visualize the portions. For foods that can be eaten in large quantities, like healthy fruits and vegetables, give her a huge labeled plastic bowl to demonstrate the sense of endlessness. If your child has more advanced language skills, you can use a variety of different-sized plates, bowls, and cups to compare that she can eat "at least this much or more", or, "at most this much or less."

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Engage your child in the following activities that are fun instead of fatiguing. Be sure that your child is given medical clearance for physical activity.

"WORKOUT" OF THE BOX

Though your child may be accustomed to traditional exercise routines like jumping jacks or pushups, he might find it more fun to use his imagination to make up his own movements with catchy, descriptive names. The 'snowball' can be made when he is seated on the floor, pulling his knees in with his hands. The 'monster



EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN: Engage your child in activities that are fun instead of fatiguing. She can use her imagination to make up her own movements with catchy, descriptive names.

walk' comes alive when your child tries to touch his toes to his out-reached hands. When using the 'jump rope', your child turns his wrists as though he is holding the jump rope while jumping.

Your child can incorporate such routines in between turns of playing a board/video game, or after sets of homework that involves drills, such as multiplication or spelling. Using more advanced math and language skills, your child can track how many exercises have been done by counting upwards, downwards, or by 5's or 10's. When your child wants to tell you about the new exercises she has designed, she can expand her language skills by creating a name for them, explain the movements, and describe the sequence.

OVER, UNDER, & EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

Books: Read stories together that match your child's language abilities and emphasize movement, like *Rosie's Walk* or *The Berenstain Bears Inside Outside Upside Down*. Have your child do the same actions, and maybe even change the characters to be different animals (e.g., "Hop like a bunny through the hallway."; "Gallop like a horse across the yard."; "Crawl like a crab under the table.").

Toys (with physical assistance if necessary): Play with pogo sticks and Sit-and-Spin using language like "jump higher/lower" and "spin faster/slower." Or, use traditional toys in different ways, like placing a hula hoop on the ground to "jump into/out of."

Games: Enjoy Duck-Duck-Goose and musical chairs using language like "tag/pat/tap" and "chase/catch/grab." Or, create games like Simon says with action words like "jump/shake/kick" (e.g., "Simon says, 'Kick your leg and then shake your arm.'").

Dance moves: "YMCA" and "The Chicken Dance" are a few good ones the whole family can get involved with. While having loads of fun, you can provide visual models of the repetitive movements for your child to follow along with ease. You can explain the concepts behind the moves like, "With my arms are up and out, I look like the letter Y!"

SMALL STEPS

Just like for adults, try a few simple changes to get your child moving more:

- *Climb the stairs versus taking the elevator or escalator. Model encouraging language like "It's so healthy to climb the stairs." Add supportive, reassuring language like, "If we get tired of climbing the stairs, we can take a little break or use the handrail to help us."*
- *Park farther away from stores while you and your child fill the time by casually chatting about what you need to purchase.*
- *To break up constant sitting on the couch, put the TV remote and the household phone in different places using location words for child to retrieve like "under the sofa / behind the lamp."*
- *Have your child do some household chores while using encouraging language like, "Wow! Thanks so much for helping me carry these big boxes!" and, "Oh! We have to scrub this annoying stain even more!"*

GET PUBLISHED

Depending upon your child's language abilities, help him write his own "Fitness Magazine" with drawings, stories, and instructions of all of the new skills he is learning. He can proudly show it to everyone, including his classroom teacher, occupational therapist, physical therapist, and physical education teacher.

HEALTHY BENEFITS AWAIT

With these suggestions, your child can develop healthy practices that become automatic, natural customs to feel a sense of independence, control, and accountability. All the while, you and your child will spend more quality time connecting and growing closer to each other. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Karen Kabaki-Sisto, M.S. CCC-SLP, is a certified Speech-Language Pathologist and Applied Behavior Analysis instructor. For over 20 years, Karen has been helping people with autism improve their communication abilities within schools and at-home settings. After a decade of technological experimentation, she invented "I Can Have Conversations With You!™", a life-changing therapy program for iPad to help people with autism enhance their social and language skills like never before. To learn more, please visit www.iCanForAutism.com