What Is a Feeding Problem?
A feeding problem occurs when a child has difficulty consuming solid foods or liquids due to a physical impairment, behavioral issue, or both. Some conditions that may disrupt feeding include oral cavity, neuromuscular, or neurologic defects. If special accommodations are not made for feeding, it can have a detrimental impact on the nutritional status of these children.

Feeding problems are usually classified as oral-motor, positioning, self-feeding, or behavioral. These issues may begin in infancy and can sometimes be treated through early intervention. However, when such conditions are present in a school setting, feeding these children will require understanding and cooperation between parents, teachers, therapists, and school nutrition personnel.

Various feeding problems and ways to address them are discussed below.

Oral-Motor Problems
Children with oral-motor problems are unable to suck, swallow, or chew their food properly. For these children, school nutrition staff may need to provide foods that are modified in texture so that children can meet their intake needs and avoid the risk of choking. Some examples of modifications likely to be requested by a physician, therapist, dietitian, or parent include the following:
- Chopped—Food needs to be chopped into bite-sized pieces using a food chopper, knife, or food processor.
- Ground—Food should be soft or small enough to swallow with little or no chewing. Food can be ground using a food processor or blender.
- Pureed—Food must have a smooth texture, similar to pudding, but should not be runny. Food can be pureed in a food processor or blender, sometimes adding a small amount of liquid to make it smooth.
- Thickened—Thickened beverages may be required for children with difficulty swallowing. This can be done using commercial thickeners or pre-thickened products.

Positioning and Self-Feeding Problems
Children with physical impairments or muscle control problems may be unable to sit up or hold their head up to eat, or they may have difficulty holding utensils and feeding themselves.
Children with positioning problems may need to lie down or stand up to eat, which may require they be fed outside of the cafeteria. Some children may have specially designed wheelchairs to position them for feeding, and arrangements should be made to accommodate such chairs at a table in the cafeteria.

For children who have difficulty with self-feeding, various devices and adaptive utensils are available to aid them in feeding themselves. Children must be taught how to use these items effectively. Typically, the washing and sanitizing of the equipment is the responsibility of the school nutrition staff.

**Behavioral Problems**

Some children have behavioral issues that can disrupt feeding, such as being easily distracted, difficulty sitting through mealtimes, refusing to eat, spitting out food, or knocking food and utensils on the floor. Although addressing these issues is the responsibility of the child’s teacher or therapist, school nutrition staff can help by

- providing small, easy-to-eat servings;
- limiting the number of foods served;
- finding a place in the cafeteria where the child can eat free from distractions; and
- attending Individualized Education Program meetings held for the child. *(This applies mainly to the School Nutrition Director.)*

**References**


