




Addressing Mealtime Challenges: Strategies for Behavior Analysts

Yev Veverka, PhD, BCBA



Think of a
focus child
with a
mealtime
challenge





Why Does Mealtime Matter?

Survival/energy/nutrition

Socialization: family time,
celebrations, school lunch

Skill development

Communication

Parent-child relationship
development

Course of Mealtime Challenges

Hypothesized that transient selective eating is part of typical child development

Selective eating and related mealtime challenges can persist and lead to the development of clinical disorders

Both trajectories present similarly in early childhood; long term course is not clear

(Cardona Cano et al., 2015)

Common Challenges

Oral motor: inability to chew, move food around in mouth, swallow

Fine motor: inability to self feed

Communication: unable to communicate needs and preferences

Social: lack of understanding of social components of mealtime

Comorbid medical conditions: reflux, allergies, swallowing disorders, etc.

Behavioral: food refusal, selectivity, crying, leaving the table, etc.

Feeding Difficulties in Children with ASD

Social interaction challenges (starts early in the feeding process)

Communication impairments

Restricted repetitive and stereotyped behaviors

Need for routine

Focus on detail

Impact of Mealtime Challenges on Parents

Increase in burden of
caregiving

Stress

Social Isolation

Frustration at dismissal of
concerns

(Greer, Gulotta, Masler, & Laud, 2008)

Common Parent Solutions

- Offer the same foods in the same environment to avoid stress
- Feed child separately
- Allow “drive by eating”/grazing
- Prepare separate meal for child from the rest of the family
- Avoid eating out and eating with others



When do mealtime challenges become a concern?



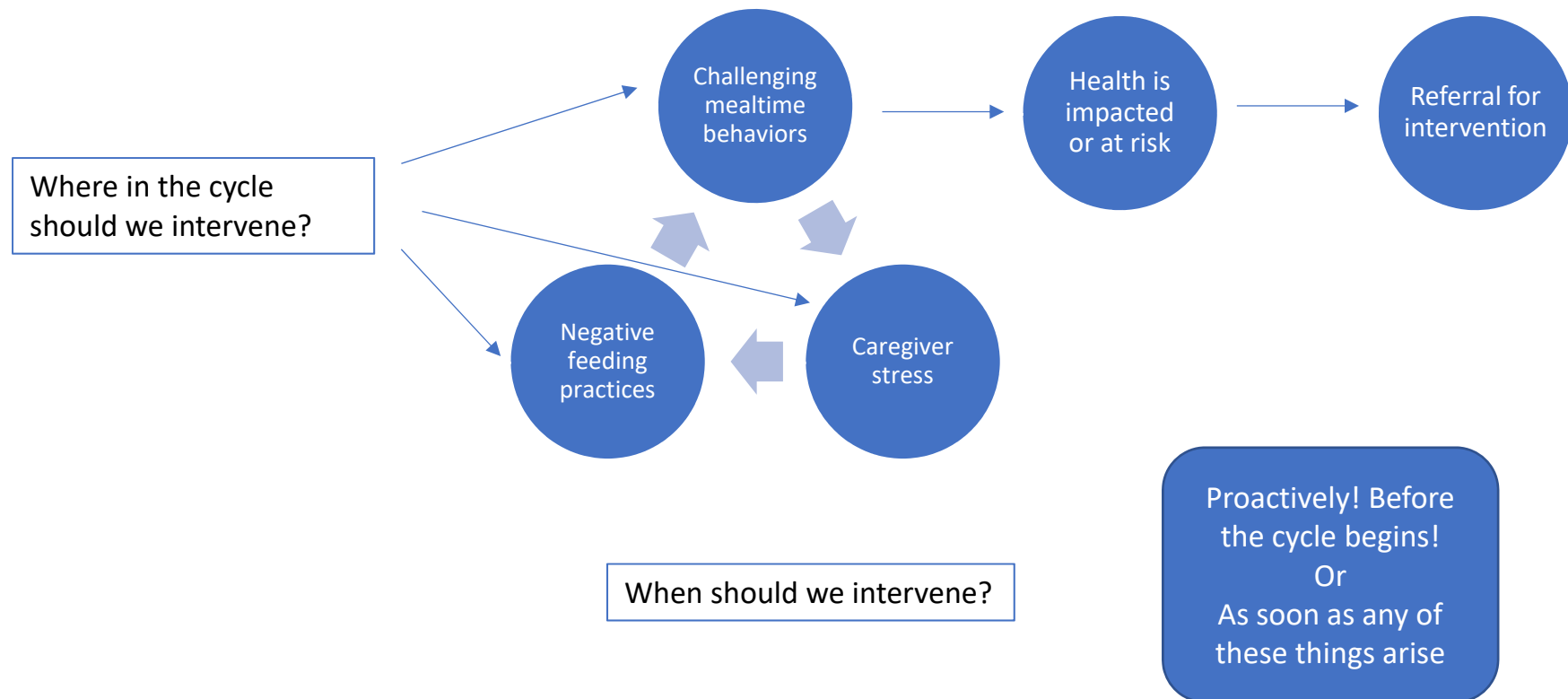
Most commonly when health is at risk:

- Low weight
- Failure to thrive
- Risk of feeding tube
- Nutritional deficiencies
- Overweight

It does not have to be medical for it to be a concern!

- Lack of enjoyment (by child or caregiver)
- Inability to dine out of the home
- Preparing special meals
- General stress surrounding mealtime
- Child missing social opportunities

Mealtimes Challenges Cycle





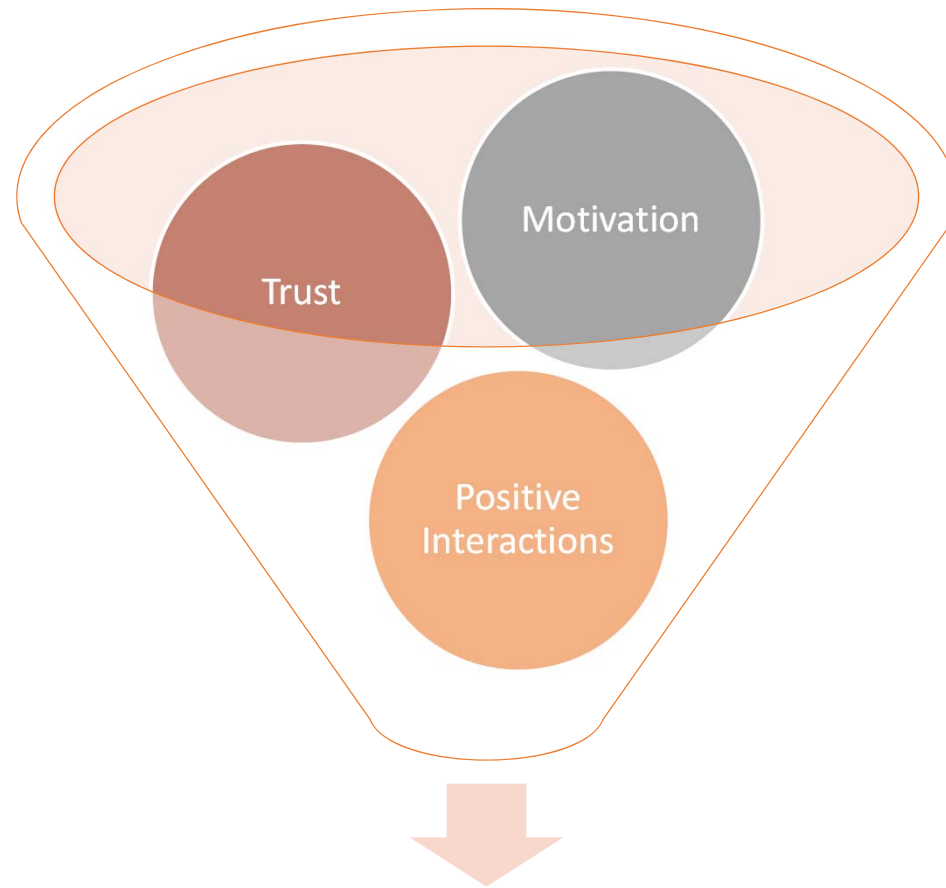
What we
know about
current
literature on
mealtime
intervention

Strategies rooted in ABA are effective in treating mealtime challenges

Many interventions utilize escape extinction procedures

Intervention is more commonly implemented by a professional rather than a parent or caregiver

Mealtime intervention typically occurs after the preschool years



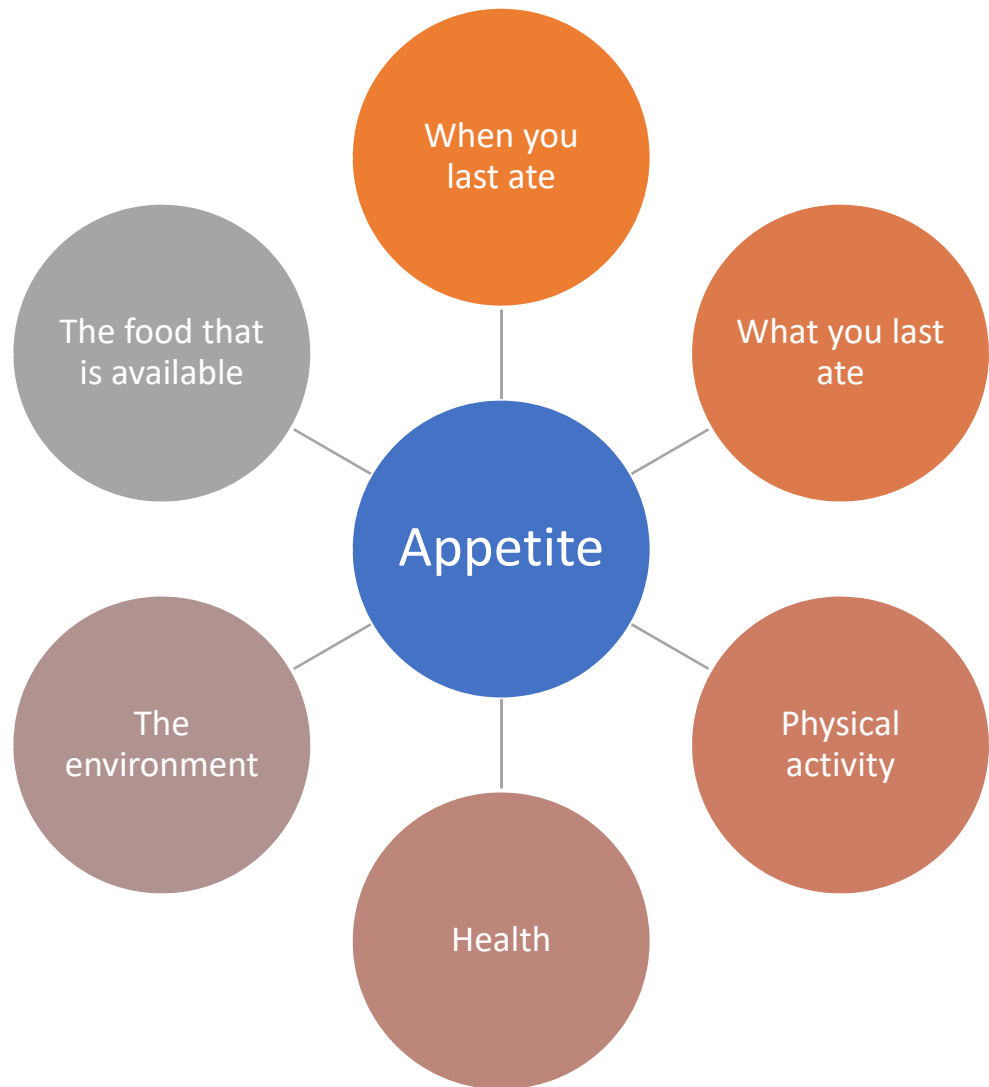
"When I participate in
mealtime, I feel good"

Components of Successful
Mealtimes

Building Trust

Trust	Coercion
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mealtime interactions are enjoyable• New food interactions are encouraged and reinforced, not forced• Child is given choices• Child is given a way to say “no”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mealtime comes with high demands• The adult is in charge of what and how much a child eats• Child is forced to eat

Increasing
Motivation:
What's the
biggest factor
that
influences
your
motivation to
eat?



Thinking about appetite

- Present new foods when child is likely hungry but not overly hungry (snack time is good!)
- Think about what your child is drinking (milk will fill a child up!)
- Think about physical activity that day
- Think about the digestive system



Positive Interactions

- How can you make mealtime more fun?
Traditions, songs, conversation
- Where is mealtime taking place?
- What sensory factors are at play?
- Who is participating?



What do
we want
children to
learn
about
mealtime?

People eat things that I
do not

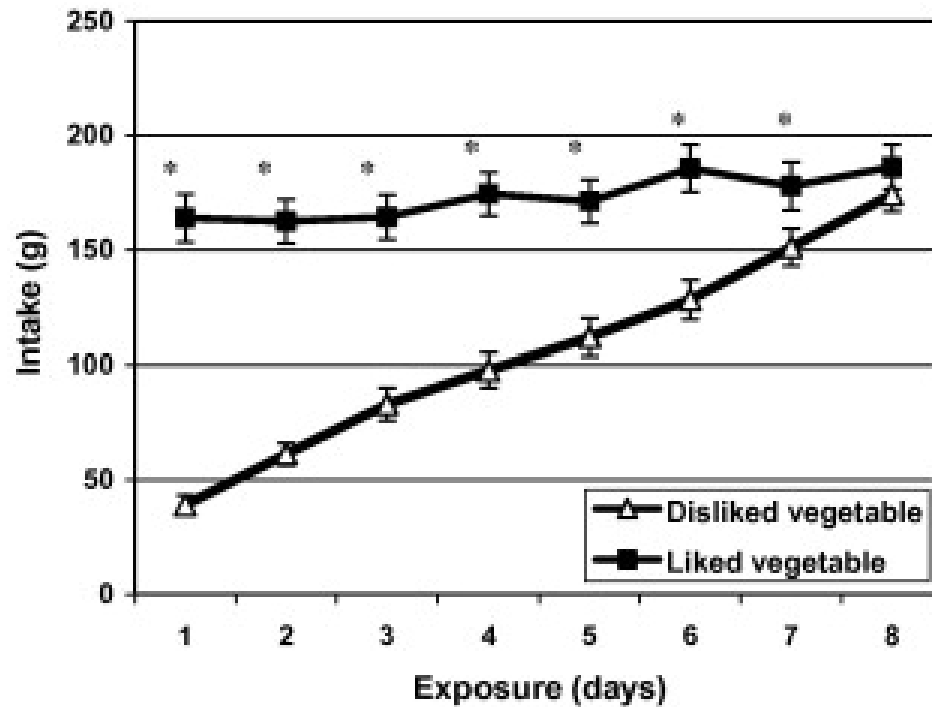
It is enjoyable to be at
the table/in the room
with others who eat

Participating in
mealtime makes me
feel good (socially,
emotionally, physically)

It's ok to try new foods:
I might like it, I might
not

I can politely refuse an
offer and make a
different choice

Intervention Strategies



Continue to expose children to food even after they refuse to consume it

Don't force food on a child, simply expose

Research has shown that repeated exposure increases acceptance

Maier, A., Chabanet, C., Schaal, B., Issanchou, S., & Leathwood, P. (2007)

Repeated Exposure

Involvement in the Mealtime Process

- Going to the grocery store
- Assisting with preparation or being in the same room as food being prepared for sensory experience
- Participating in mealtime with the family: sitting down at the table, serving self





Utensils



Food as utensils



Fading: Texture Continuum

- Start small and familiar
- Take baby steps toward the desired food consistency
- Consider the texture of the utensil



Fading Flavors

- Use favorite condiments or puree favorite foods to use as dips: gradually fade the amount you put on
- Combine preferred foods with target foods (Example: dip a favorite cracker into a new puree)
- Use frozen juice ice cubes to introduce new flavors in drinks
- Think about how you can mix foods gradually





Bite size



“Just Try It!”

Shaping



Look at the food

Tolerate it on the plate

Smell

Lick

Put on lips

Put to teeth

Put in mouth and take out

Take a nibble

Take a bigger bite

Shaping Visual



Modeling

- Encourage family-style eating
- Model trying new foods
- Use peer modeling
- Use hunger and satiety words



Provide Choices

Include at least one choice that the child usually likes

Provide a choice to say
“No thank you”

Provide choices about ways to interact with food (“Do you want to try a lick or a mouse bite?”)

Incorporate Play

- Get creative!
- Create food interaction opportunities
- Pair food with fun



Replace Challenging Behaviors

Behavior to decrease	Behavior to increase
Throwing food	No thank you bowl, saying “no thank you”
Refusing by yelling or pushing a spoon away	Politely refusing or taking a lick or small bite
Leaving the mealtime area	Staying in area or asking to be excused



Working with Families

Cultural Considerations

What food is offered?

What are cultural views
on feeding a child?

How do mealtimes take
place?

Who is involved?

Parent Buy-In

- Allow parents to share priorities; do not decide for them
- Break goals down into small benchmarks
- Share the progress
- Celebrate the victories!
- Empower: teach families the strategies and explain the behavioral mechanisms behind them.
- Plan for generalization

Example Parent Education

Providing Choices

What is it?

Providing opportunities for children to make a choice to increase desirable behaviors such as engagement and compliance.

Make it simple	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use visuals to supplement language (pictures or holding up objects)• Provide 2 or 3 choices
Be specific!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instead of asking an open-ended question ("what do you want to try?"), provide specific choices ("Do you want to try the turkey or the cheese?")
Making a choice is a choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What if your child doesn't choose? "Do you want to make a choice, or should I make it for you?"
Give easy choices for difficult tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• For a task that seems difficult to a child, break it down into smaller tasks that are simple. For example, instead of asking your child to take a bite of a new vegetable, ask "do you want to lick the broccoli or touch it?"

Examples of Choices for Mealtime:

- Which chair?
- Which utensil?
- How to interact with food?
- What to put on their plate?
- How many scoops?

Reinforcement

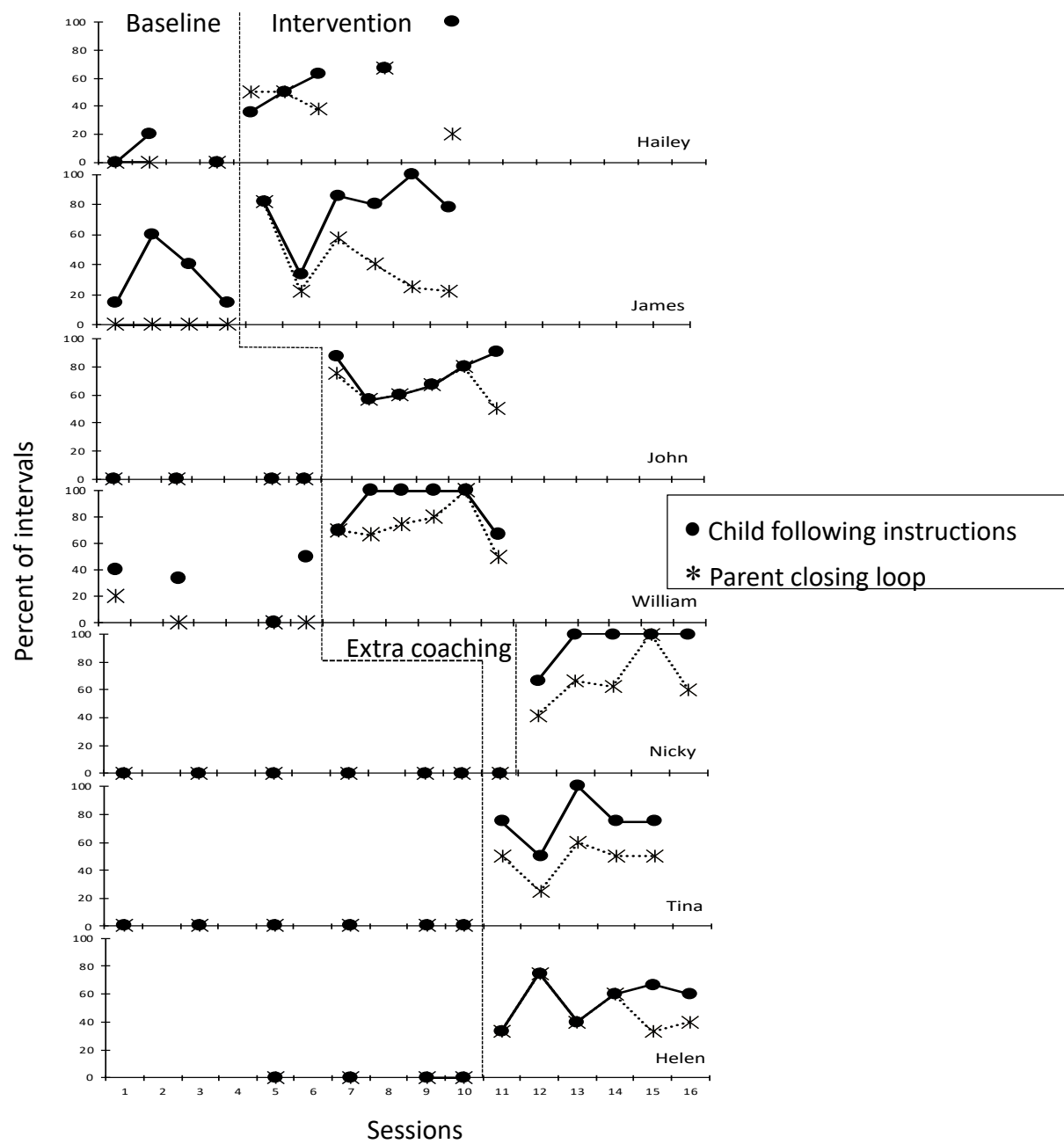
What is it?

Anything that increases the likelihood that the behavior will increase in the future

"What's in it for me?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make sure your child knows what they are earning.• Use first/then statements Ex: "First let's touch the banana. Then, we can play with the ball."
Be specific!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Point out exactly what your child is doing correctly. Ex: "Great sitting down at the table!" "You touched the banana!" "Wow! I love how you're trying the new food!"
Reinforcement is immediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide reinforcement as soon as the desired behavior occurs. Don't ask your child to do the behavior again. Reinforce right away!
Reinforcement is contingent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your child only gets the reinforcement when they engage in the behavior you are trying to increase. Don't give in!
Catch the good!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't wait to have to correct behaviors. Catch your child engaging in desirable behaviors.

Examples of reinforcers:

- Edibles
- Activities: coloring, jumping on trampoline, going for walk
- Social: high fives, tickles, praise
- Toys



Prioritizing Challenges to Target

Who is impacted by the challenge?

What is the extent of the impact?

- Missing out of social opportunities
- Family stress
- Health

Example Mealtime Goals

Increase flexibility in mealtime behaviors

- Accepting food presented in a different way
- Eating with a nonpreferred utensil
- Trying a combination of food

Willingness to try a new food

- Tolerating on plate
- Taking a lick
- Taking a bite

Adding a goal food to repertoire

- Adding a serving size of vegetable
- Adding a couple bites per meal of a new food

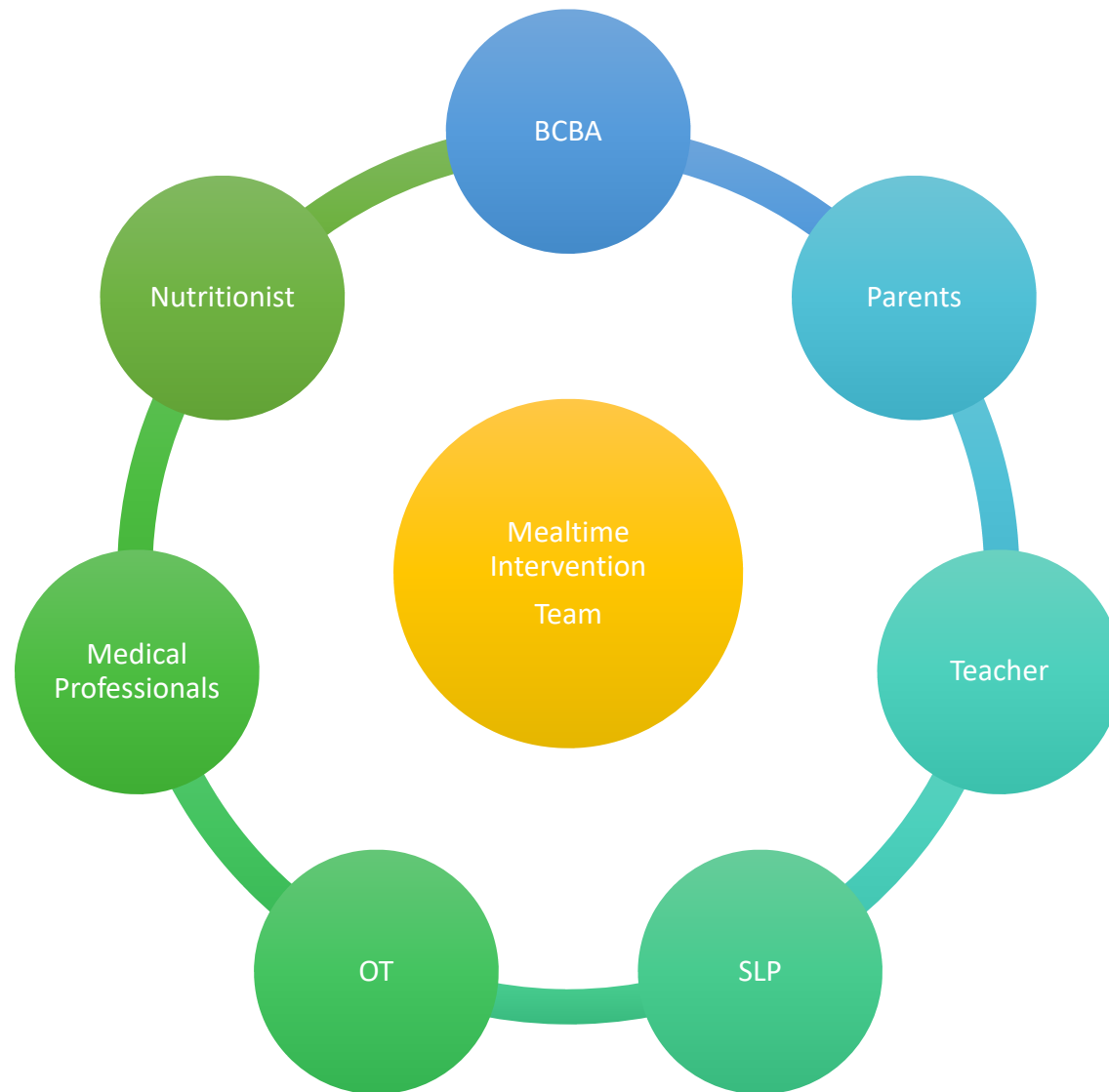
Self-feeding (with fingers or utensil)

Drinking out of a cup

Sitting at the table

Saying “no thank you”

Decreasing refusal behaviors



Collaboration is Crucial

Questions?

Get in touch:

Yevev@uw.edu