Many children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) have difficulty eating healthy foods and being physically active. They face many of the same challenges as typically developing children, as well as additional challenges and risk factors for obesity. Below is a list of some of the healthy eating and physical activity challenges faced by children with I/DD.

Healthy Eating Challenges

**Eating Problems**
Children with developmental disabilities are more likely to have eating problems than typically developing children. These may include:

- Selective or “choosy” eating
- Sensitivity to texture, color, smell, temperature, or brands of certain foods
- Unusual or ritualistic eating patterns
- Preference for foods that are high in calories and low in nutrients

**Oral-Motor Problems**
Some children with developmental disabilities have oral-motor problems that can affect their ability to chew and swallow food. These children prefer softer foods which may be highly processed and less nutritious.

**Caloric Needs**
Children with certain developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome, may have lower caloric needs. It can be hard to limit caloric intake in environments where unhealthy foods are prevalent.

**Food Rewards**
Food rewards, which tend to be high in sugar and calories, are often used to reinforce desired behavior in special education.

**Mealtime Behavior**
Children with I/DD often have difficult behavior at mealtimes. This can make it more challenging to eat together as a family. This is a concern because studies show that children who regularly eat with their families are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables.

**Self-Awareness**
Children with I/DD may not understand the health risks and other consequences associated with poor diet and lack of physical activity.
Physical Activity Challenges\(^1,3,6,7\)

Functional Limitations
Children with I/DD may have limitations that serve as barriers to being physically active, including:
- Tiring more easily
- Mobility issues
- Different social and communication needs
- Behavioral challenges
- Need for close supervision or support

Inclusivity
Including children with I/DD in physical education programs may require adaptation. If instructors do not make the necessary program adaptations, or lack necessary equipment, children with I/DD may be left out.

Attitudes
When the emphasis of an activity is on competition and winning, children with I/DD may be excluded from group activities and team sports.

Self-Monitoring
Children with I/DD may have difficulty with self-monitoring. For example, a child may struggle to keep up a certain level of intensity while exercising. This means they may have trouble meeting daily recommendations for moderate to vigorous physical activity.

Safety Concerns
Families of children with I/DD often have concerns about their child’s safety or risk of injury and may restrict their child’s participation in sports in order to protect them.

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