

# TOOLS TO ADDRESS EATING PROBLEMS

in Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

While children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) often face challenges to making healthy food choices, there are a wide range of tools to help them adopt healthier eating habits. Here is information about some of these tools.

## Daily Schedules

Many children with I/DD do best when they can anticipate each part of their day. A schedule helps a child get into a routine of eating at regular meal and snack times. Try putting a different image for each snack or mealtime around the face of a clock. Post the schedule where the child can easily see it.

## Food Chaining

Food chaining is an individualized, structured approach to increasing the number and types of food a child will eat. It can be used when a parent or caregiver exposes a child to a new food. The child starts by just seeing and touching, then tasting, and ultimately eating the new food.

For more information about food chaining, check out the book *Food Chaining: The Proven 6-Step Plan to Stop Picky Eating, Solve Feeding Problems, and Expand Your Child's Diet* by Cheri Fraker or visit [www.abilitypath.org/health-daily-care/health/growth-and-nutrition/articles/obesity/pdfs/parent\\_toolkit-\\_food\\_chaining.pdf](http://www.abilitypath.org/health-daily-care/health/growth-and-nutrition/articles/obesity/pdfs/parent_toolkit-_food_chaining.pdf).

## Food Diaries

Food diaries are useful for children who need help improving their diets. A child, with help from their family and caregivers, tracks the types and quantities of food and beverage consumed. They may also record environmental factors that impact mealtimes, such as where the meal is eaten or whether a child is watching T.V. while eating. Try using the simple "My Food Diary" template created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/pdf/food\\_diary\\_cdc.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/pdf/food_diary_cdc.pdf).

## Hunger Scale

Some children find it difficult to distinguish hunger from other needs, such as the need for attention or stimulation. Hunger scales can help children become mindful of their level of hunger. Try using the "Mindfulness of Hunger Scale" found here: [www.mindfuleatinginfo.com/uploads/5/1/1/8/5118392/mindfulness\\_of\\_hunger\\_scale.jpg](http://www.mindfuleatinginfo.com/uploads/5/1/1/8/5118392/mindfulness_of_hunger_scale.jpg).

## Meal Pacing

Timers, vibrating watches, and visual aids can improve meal pacing for children who eat too quickly or too slowly. A timer or vibrating watch can be set to mark the appropriate time to pause between bites. A visual aid, such as a sequence of pictures or photos, can demonstrate activities to extend mealtimes and make them more enjoyable.



## Social Stories

Using developmentally appropriate words and images, a social story describes a situation or concept that a child finds challenging. Although originally used to help children engage in social situations, social stories can address a wide range of issues including eating problems. For more information, visit: [www.carolgraysocialstories.com/](http://www.carolgraysocialstories.com/).

## Token Systems

A token system can be used with children who refuse to try new foods or to address challenging mealtime behavior. Caregivers and families can create a simple system that allows a child to earn a token or reward for desirable behavior, like trying a new vegetable or sitting quietly at the table for fifteen minutes. Tokens should be tangible non-food items, such as stickers, marbles, or cards, that family members or caregivers can give to a child immediately after he or she completes the desired activity. Tokens can later be traded for larger rewards like extra outdoor play time or visiting a friend.

## Visual Aids

Visual aids are useful for children who have trouble using language, and understanding and following directions. One type of visual aid is a “First-Then” board. A “First-Then” board shows a picture of an object or action followed by a picture of a reward. For example, a caregiver might show a child a picture of a snack with the word “eat” followed by a picture of a swing set with the word “play”. The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is another type of visual aid that can be used to promote a variety of healthy eating and physical activity behaviors. Learn more about PECS at [www.pecsusa.com/pecs.php](http://www.pecsusa.com/pecs.php).

