

Investigating the Effectiveness of a Relationship-based Feeding Intervention in Premature Picky Eaters

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Abstract

Purpose: The study investigated the effectiveness of a relationship-based feeding intervention for children who are picky eaters. While there are many currently researched feeding interventions which integrate behavioral and sensory integration intervention, more research is needed to address multiple factors involved in feeding, including parental stress and influence, education for the parent, play, and to determine the effectiveness of holistic and relationship-based feeding interventions.

Design: A single case study experimental design utilized non-randomized techniques to investigate the impact of a relationship-based feeding intervention on the participants' picky eating. Inclusion criteria required participants to: be over the age of 18 years, not currently pregnant, willing to attend five weekly feeding program sessions with their child, and complete both pre-and post-assessments. Child participants were required to be between the ages of two years to five years and eleven months, born prematurely, not currently receiving therapy for feeding, and not previously involved in a behavioral feeding program.

Method: One participant was selected through voluntary convenience sampling of a mid-sized community population. Following pre-assessment procedures, the parent completed five weekly sessions including (a) one 1 ½ - 2-hour parent educational training session on holistic, relationship-based feeding; and (b) four 1 - 1 ½ hour therapist-guided feeding sessions with their child. Outcome measures were administered pre-and post-intervention and included a researcher developed food checklist, mealtime observation assessment (video analysis), Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM), Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS), and About Your Child's Eating (AYCE) measure. Pre- and post-assessment of the COPM, GAS, and AYCE were calculated using standard scoring procedures. Demographic and pre-and post-intervention data were analyzed with descriptive statistics.

Results: Following the 5-week relationship-based feeding intervention, data analyzed through descriptive statistics displayed an increase in the number of foods eaten in five of the six food categories, with a total of 15 foods gained. Through an observational analysis of mealtime behaviors, the child displayed an increase in positive mealtime interactions, decreased number of negative mealtime interactions from pre- to post-assessment, and increased developmental oral motor skills. All four problem areas identified with the COPM demonstrated significant increase in the caregiver's satisfaction rating, and two of the four areas showed an increase in occupational performance rating. Four collaborative GAS goals that aligned with COPM occupational performance problem areas were met or exceeded. Two of three AYCE subscales displayed a clinically significant increase post-intervention.

Conclusion: The holistic relationship-based feeding intervention displayed the ability to promote food-related exploration and acceptance of new foods. The 5-week intervention was found to support the established hypotheses of (a) significant changes among pre- and post-assessment measures, (b) an increase in the number of functional mealtime behaviors, (c) a decrease in the number of dysfunctional mealtime behaviors, and (d) an increase in the number and variety of foods eaten. By combining parent education and family-centered feeding intervention, occupational therapy practitioners can support the unique parent-child dyad to meet feeding goals.