

## **Swallowing (Dysphagia) and Feeding Services in the School Setting: Things Parents Should Know**

Children who have been identified with a swallowing and feeding disorder/Pediatric Feeding Disorder (PFD) as infants or toddlers may continue to exhibit swallowing and feeding disorders into their school years, ages 3 to 21 years. Others will develop PFD in later childhood. There are differences addressing a swallowing and PFD in a school setting compared to a medical setting or private therapy setting, as well as, differences within different school districts.

### **Reasons school districts address swallowing and feeding disorders**

School districts are required to follow federal regulations when serving students with special needs:

- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**-school districts have the responsibility to provide a safe environment for students at school. Health Services are a related service under IDEA that requires districts to provide these services when they are necessary for a student to stay in school and access his/her curriculum and do not require the services of a physician thus providing a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).
- **United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition (USDA) regulations**-the school meal program falls under the jurisdiction of the USDA. School food services programs are required to modify meals for students whose disability prevents them from accessing the typical cafeteria meal.
- **504 Plan** -defines a person with a disability as any person who has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of life's major activities which includes swallowing and feeding disorders. Districts must establish a 504 plan for students who qualify.

### **School districts are beginning to address swallowing and feeding.**

In the past, school districts depended on information provided by parents and classroom teacher's observations to adapt a student's meal to his/her disability. This was prior to the training that speech language pathologists (SLPs) now obtain as part of their graduate school programs. SLPs and other professionals such as occupational therapists (OTs) and physical therapists (PTs) with special training in swallowing and feeding disorders are now employed in many school districts. They have the knowledge and skills to determine the safest and most efficient method of feeding children with these disorders at school. Since this is a recent service, some districts currently do not have the procedures or personnel in place.

### **Preschool Entry into Special Education**

Moving from an early childhood setting to the public-school system requires knowing what the district has to offer and how to access those services. If you suspect or know that your child will need special education services, there is a process for qualifying for special education services:

- Inquire about Child Find in your county prior to your child turning 3 years old.
- Contact the Special Education Department in your local school district. You will be directed to the testing team who will set up a screening date. Attend the screening which determines if a full evaluation is indicated.

- If your child qualifies for a multidisciplinary evaluation for classification then a time and place for testing will be set up.
- The evaluation is done by a team of specialists who will work with you and your child to determine if your child qualifies for services.
- Swallowing and feeding disorders (PFD) is not considered a special education classification. Many students with swallowing and feeding disorders (PFD) qualify under Developmentally Delayed or Other Health Impaired.
- Contact your local school district for specific information on this process. (IDEA, 2006)
- Provide them with information on your child's medical history, swallowing and feeding diagnosis and treatments, and private feeding therapy intervention.
- Share with the district team how your child eats at home including food preparation, positioning during family mealtimes, and special precautions. Working together with the school team results in the best services for your child.
- Listen carefully to how they plan to establish a safe feeding plan for your child, train classroom and cafeteria staff, and monitor safety to make sure that all areas are covered.

**If your child has not been diagnosed with PFD but has signs and/or symptoms, the school district team may contact you with concerns about your child's swallowing and feeding skills:**

- Once your child is in school, the school team may identify a swallowing and feeding disorder and contact you with their concerns.
- These concerns are based on observations of your child during mealtimes at school by classroom staff and therapists.
- They will share their concerns and ask for information from you to help them address your child's safety needs at school.
- Your input will help the team to establish a plan specific to the needs of your child.
- The school team's goal is to write a safe swallowing and feeding plan, to monitor your child's mealtimes and to revise the plan when necessary, in order to provide safe, efficient and enjoyable mealtimes at school.

**The Parent's Role in this Process**

There are specific things that parents/guardians can do to assist the school testing team during the process of determining eligibility for special education services:

- ✓ Inform the testing team if your child has PFD and needs modifications during mealtimes at school.
- ✓ Provide them with a thorough medical history, feeding history, PFD diagnosis and treatments, and private feeding therapy intervention plans.
- ✓ Share with the district team how your child eats at home including food preparation, positioning during family mealtimes, and special precautions.
- ✓ Inquire about how they plan to establish a safe feeding plan for your child, train classroom and cafeteria staff, and monitor safety during mealtimes.

**If you are not sure how your local school district addresses swallowing and feeding (PFD):**

- Contact the Supervisor of Special Education (or Director)
- Talk to the SLP or OT at your local school.
- Request a team approach, to establish and maintain safe feeding at school.
- Work with the district by providing information and communicating with the team to help your child have safe and enjoyable mealtimes at school.

**Swallowing and Feeding School-based Team Members**

Swallowing and feeding disorders are addressed using a team approach. The following are members of a school district's swallowing and feeding team:

- Speech language pathologist (SLP)
- Occupational therapist (OT)
- Physical therapist (PT)
- School Nurse
- Cafeteria Manager
- Classroom Teacher
- Classroom Paraprofessional
- School Administrator (Principal)

School-based teams work closely with parents and physicians on establishing and maintaining safe mealtimes at school.

**Questions to ask school districts when your child has a swallowing and feeding disorder:**

1. Do you have a procedure for addressing swallowing and feeding disorders to establish safety during mealtimes? What is the procedure? Are the parents part of the procedure?

*Districts should have a procedure in place for all students with swallowing and feeding disorders. Parents should be part of the district's team procedure.*

2. Do you have trained SLPs, OTs, PTs, and school nurses who can address my child's swallowing and feeding concerns?

*In order to safely address swallowing and feeding in the school setting, the professional staff must have adequate knowledge, skills and training. See Feeding Matters resource:*

[https://www.feedingmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/therapist\\_qualifications\\_-\\_arvedson\\_and\\_homer.pdf](https://www.feedingmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/therapist_qualifications_-_arvedson_and_homer.pdf)

3. Does the district procedure provide for the establishment and maintenance of a safe feeding plan for my child?

*Using a comprehensive procedure to identify and treat swallowing and feeding disorders will provide the best outcomes for your child during mealtimes at school. The following steps are important to achieving this goal:*

- *Referral Process*
- *Parent Interview and Input*
- *Interdisciplinary Observation of meals at school (Clinical Evaluation)*
- *Swallowing and Feeding Plan and Individualized Health Plan*

- Cafeteria Procedure
  - Training of classroom staff on the swallowing and feeding plan and recommended food modifications
  - IEP meeting
  - Referral Process for Modified Barium Swallow Study (MBSS) or medical consultation, when indicated
  - Process for Revision of Plan, when indicated
  - Ongoing Monitoring for maintaining safety
  - Therapeutic Intervention for improving functional eating skills, when indicated
4. How many classroom staff members will be trained on how to safely feed my child? Is there something in place for when the trained feeders are all absent?  
*When a student has a feeding and swallowing plan that includes monitoring during mealtimes for safety, it is essential that classroom staff be trained on implementing the plan. At least 3 classroom staff members (including the teacher) should be trained on the plan in the event the main feeders are absent. If all three trained feeders are absent the school administration should have in place a list of qualified feeders such as the SLP or OT who would be assigned to feed your child.*
5. What does a district team need from parents/guardians to assist in establishing and maintaining safe feeding for my child at school?  
*The most important thing a parent/guardian can do to assist a school district swallowing and feeding team is to work closely with them. Open communication and sharing of information will help to make your child's mealtimes at school safe and pleasant.*

### **Suggestions for Working with School Districts**

1. Provide the school team with as much information as possible on your child's medical and swallowing and feeding history.
2. Sign a Release of Information for each of your child's physicians and private therapy providers to assist the district team in communication.
3. If your child will be bringing lunch from home, work with the school team to ensure that the food packed at home meets the recommendations of your child's swallowing and feeding plan at school.
4. Addressing a swallowing and feeding disorder (Pediatric Feeding Disorder) in the school setting can be challenging. Work with the school team to make pleasurable, safe and adequate nutritional intake during mealtimes at school a priority.

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