Weber State University Bachelor of Integrated Studies Program

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Project Title: How to Feed Your Picky Eater: Tips for Parents with Autistic Children

Brief summary of project: I created a booklet that is full of feeding tips that will help many parents as they are raising their child with Autism. It also includes many activities for kids on fruits and vegetables. The purpose of that is based on the theory that as children become more familiar with these foods, they will be more likely to start eating them. A local business that works with special needs individuals has agreed to distribute these booklets to their client’s families.

Area of Emphasis 1: Child and Family Studies

Committee Member from that discipline: Joyce Buck

Area of Emphasis 2: Nutrition

Committee Member from this discipline: Rodney Hansen

Area of Emphasis 3: Sales and Service Technology

Committee Member from this discipline: Carl Grunander
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to the many people who helped to make this project possible. I couldn’t have done it without them. I am particularly grateful for the assistance given by my sister-in-law, Jenna Stephens, who gave of her time and expertise, and directed me toward quality information pertinent to my project. Also, my professors, Rodney Hansen, Joyce Buck, and Carl Grunander, who were my mentors for this project. They helped me along the way and made me excited for the future ahead of me.
For my project, I decided to create a booklet for parents that is full of tips and advice on how they can get their autistic child to make healthy food choices. Included at the back of the booklet are activities for children. The activities are all about fruits and vegetables. The child will learn about how they grow, the difference between fruits and vegetables, what they do for our bodies, and there is also a coloring section. The reason I wanted to include these activities is because it can help the parents out as they are trying to introduce new foods into the child’s diet. I will go more into detail about that later. I work for a nonprofit organization called Rise that offers support services to children and adults with disabilities. I created this booklet in hopes that Rise would see a need for it and distribute it to their clients’ families when they see them at their regular visits. Many of the clients that I work with have autism. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a mental condition that’s characterized by difficulty in communicating, forming relationships, and in using language and abstract concepts. It’s very common for a child with ASD to be a picky eater. As I’ve gotten to know the clients and their families, I’ve noticed that poor nutrition is a common issue the parents/guardians are having. By doing this project, not only was I was able to combine my three areas of emphasis, which has been beneficial academically, but also helped me grow and gain experience in the real world, which is, I believe, what this project was really about. Throughout this paper I hope to make those reasons known.

The areas of emphasis I studied at Weber State University were Child and Family Studies, Nutrition, and Sales and Service Technology. The knowledge and skills I have learned in each area have helped me as I’ve worked on this project. One of the main reasons I chose Child and Family Studies is because family is what is most
important to me in my life. They also happen to be a big reason why I chose to study ASD for my senior project. My brother and sister-in-law have a four-year-old boy with ASD, and I see them about once a week. His diet seems to consist of candy, fruit snacks, popcorn, and bread. He’s a very sweet boy but throws tantrums regularly, doesn’t seem to be making too much progress mentally, and seems frustrated that people don’t understand him. Joan Guthrie Medlen said, “Whenever a child has a disability, the importance of nutrition escalates… For a child with ASD, a healthy, balanced diet can make a world of difference in their ability to learn, how they manage their emotions, and how they process information” (Ansel, 2013). With that in mind, I hoped to learn enough so that my little nephew can grow, develop, and become as happy and healthy as possible. The Child and Family Studies department focuses on creating environments that enhance the lives and healthy development of individuals and their families. “The Family is the basic unit of society and as such should be strengthened and included in the process of development” (World, n.d.). In my booklet, I mention that experts recommend serving three meals, and two to three snacks a day. In the past 15 years researchers have confirmed that having family mealtime is good for the spirit, brain, and health of all family members. Regular family dinners are linked to lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy and depression, higher grade-point averages and higher self-esteem. It can also help increase children’s vocabulary, build resilience, lower rates of obesity and eating disorders (Fishel, 2014).

Ellyn Satter’s Division of Responsibility really helped to shape my project. Ellyn Satter is a Registered Dietitian and Family Therapist. She has done a lot for the nutrition world. Her Division of Responsibility is the gold standard for feeding children. She wants
children to develop eating competence as they grow up. Basically, she’s broken up responsibility for the parents and child. The parent is responsible for what, when, and where. The child is responsible for how much and whether. She emphasizes trust rather than control, providing rather than depriving, and competency rather than deficiency (Satter, 2014).

The Division of Responsibility is great for raising children, but I also had to do a lot of research about ASD specifically. To prepare for this project, I read a lot of books on ASD so that I could understand those individuals more. That’s something I would recommend to these parents as well is to do some studying. I’ve become so much more patient and understanding toward these individuals now that I know more about the disorder. Individuals with ASD are going to process things much differently than children without the disorder, which means parents may have to take a different approach to eating with their child who has ASD than they have with their other children. Inadequate nutrition is more common among children with ASD than those who are unaffected by the disorder. They are especially low in calcium and protein. Calcium helps to build strong bones, and protein is important for growth, mental development, and health. I was able to find a lot of good information online about different things parents can do to get their child to make healthier choices. Each website varied a little bit, some having more detailed steps and some less, but they all had around seven things for the parents to do and keep in mind (See Appendix A).

First was to rule out medical problems. Children with ASD may not know how to tell you that certain foods make their stomach hurt, and gastrointestinal distress is very
common among these kids. The child’s doctor can figure out what the problem is and let parents know how to deal with it.

The second is to stay calm because introducing new food is probably going to take a long time. Lots of children need to taste a food more than a dozen times before they’re willing to eat it without complaining, and this can take even longer if the child has ASD. Also, some kids are such picky eaters that they will throw a fit if the food is even on their plate. Parents need to be especially patient with these children. Food should not be a source of conflict. Arguing or trying to force a child to eat will usually just make things worse. Like I mentioned before, it’s the parent’s job to decide what, when, and where. The child gets to decide whether and how much. Children with ASD benefit from routine. Lunch time could be the same time every day, and the child can use their same plate and silverware if they want. Children with ASD tend to do better when expectations are defined. The parent can let them know that they’ll be expected to sit at the table for lunch and the parent will set a timer. When the timer goes off then they can be excused. It doesn’t matter if there is still food on their plate after the timer goes off.

The third thing parents can do is take small steps toward tasting new food. Many kids with ASD are afraid to try new things. Parents can start by placing the new food on the table but not on the child’s plate. The parent and other family members can eat the food and talk about how yummy it is to them. Eventually the parent can tell the child they don’t have to eat it but you are going to put it on their plate. The next day they’ll need to touch the food. Soon they’ll have to taste it but they don’t have to swallow. Then eventually they’ll be expected to have a bite. This process can be repeated, and new foods will likely be accepted quicker the more times parents do this.
The fourth thing parents can do is pay attention to textures. Many kids with ASD are hypersensitive to textures. They may not like a squishy tomato, but they might like it if it’s chopped and put into salsa or blended into a pasta sauce.

The fifth thing that sounds a little unconventional is parents could encourage kids to play with their food if it’s going to decrease anxiety for them. The child can paint with pasta sauce, or use vegetables to make a face on their pizza. Parents can also cut sandwiches into fun small shapes. While the parent and child are playing, the child can see the parent tasting and enjoying the food.

The sixth thing suggested was to offer choices and control. It’s ok for them to not like some foods. Parents can offer a few different choices and the child can decide what to eat or not eat.

The last thing mentioned was that food and treats shouldn’t be used as a reward. It’s not wise for a parent to say “You can eat dessert after you finish your carrots” because that can teach the child not to like carrots (Seven, 2013). Also, when parents reward good behavior with food, it teaches them to eat whether or not they’re hungry, which is a poor eating habit. Those are just a couple of the reasons why experts say food shouldn’t be used as a reward (Bhargava, 2012).

There were a couple other nutrition tips that I thought would be important to include in my project. Parents can involve children when preparing food. They can go to the grocery store, help pick out food, and prepare the food by doing simple tasks like stirring. The more familiar a child is with a food, the more likely they are to try it and like it. That’s why I wanted to include activities in the booklet. Through the activities, the child will learn about fruits and vegetables, and potentially gain an interest in it. Building
curiosity can be really helpful when trying to get kids to eat. I’ve also found that presentation is important. I have a two-year-old niece and I find it interesting that when I give her a sandwich, she won’t touch it, but if I cut it up in little pieces, she’ll eat a lot of it. She also won’t eat fish sticks that are disfigured. Parents should pay attention to little things like that with their picky eaters.

You can clearly see how Child and Family Studies and Nutrition are incorporated into my project. Now I’d like to discuss how studying Sales and Service Technology has helped me throughout this project. The thing I loved about studying sales was that I could apply what I was learning every day at work, at school, and at home. One of the classes for sales taught me how to use personality profiling so that I can work more effectively with people. One of the profiling tools we used was called DiSC. Everyone has a different blend that creates their unique personality. Once someone learns about the different personalities and how to act, interact and react to others, they can be a better leader. I also learned a lot about myself. I learned how to motivate people, how to deal with conflict, and much more. Learning that skill has helped me strengthen the relationships I have.

For example, I thought I would ask one of my sisters-in-law for help with this project. She’s a registered dietician. I knew she was a “C” type personality, which means she is really good with details, she doesn’t like to be rushed, and she’s very calm. She also has some “I” type personality in her, which means that she is a people person, she likes attention, and enjoys talking about herself. Knowing that, I’ve tried to keep up on what’s going on in her life. I’ll write her notes, or give her a call just to chat. Since I had a good relationship with her, she was more than happy to help me with my
project. If I hadn’t built that relationship, she probably would have felt used because the only time I’d contact her was when I needed her help. She has spoken at many universities on the topic of nutrition with children who have ASD. She told me what websites would have the best information, and was extremely helpful.

I’ve been able to profile people’s personalities at work as well so I know whether I should just get to the point when I talk with them or engage in casual conversation first. Small things like that will help the other person feel more comfortable. I also focused on building rapport with my managers and supervisors. They were the ones I had to sell my booklet to. I found myself using SPIN selling techniques because of the type of questions I was asking them. SPIN selling is a very useful technique. SPIN is an acronym for Situation Problem Implication Need-payoff. Each word is a category for a type of question the salesperson will ask. SPIN selling helped to shape the way I approached selling my booklet to Rise (Rackham, 1996). They said that many of their clients didn’t have the best nutrition, and it would be good information for the clients, their families, and also Rise employees to know. I showed them the progress I was making on my booklet and asked for their input so that they would become invested in it, too. They were willing to pay for the printing, and they are going to distribute them to their clients, as well as having them available in their office in Ogden for anyone to take.

In my sales classes it was common to hear people talk about how they never wanted to be a salesperson, but Weber’s sales program changed their perspective on things. Something that I really respect about this sales program is that the goal is to create respectable and honest salespeople. A secret to success I’ve learned is to show how much you care for people. I read a book recently called *The Greatest Salesman in
the World and in it, it said “My reasoning they may counter; my speech they may distrust; my apparel they may disapprove; my face they may reject, even my bargains may cause them suspicion; yet my love will melt all hearts liken to the sun whose rays soften the coldest clay”. Showing people I care for them helped me to succeed in creating this project, but it is still something I am working on being better at (Mandino, 1968).

I’m pleased with how my project turned out. I was able to combine my three areas of emphasis so that I could create a project that could benefit the community. If parents follow the tips given in the booklet, their family’s lives will be enhanced not just because they will have better nutrition, but they’ll be closer as a family, and there are so many benefits that go along with that. I’m also glad I could use the skills and knowledge I learned over the past few years from my sales classes as I was using my resources and networking with others so that I could create this booklet and get the word out to people.
Work Cited


   http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/resources/faq/


   http://ellynsatterinstitute.org/dor/divisionofresponsibilityinfeeding.php

Seven ways to help a picky eater with autism. (2013, May 7). Retrieved

Appendix A


