

FOOD IN THE CLASSROOM

Prader-Willi Syndrome (PWS) is a genetic disorder that affects appetite, growth, metabolism, cognitive functioning, and behavior. Chronic feelings of insatiable hunger and slowed metabolisms are present. Therefore, people with PWS metabolize their food at half the rate as their peers do and can easily gain weight when consuming food outside of their daily scheduled meals.

Many school districts have courses embedded in their curriculum that involve food. Additionally, teachers may incorporate instructional activities and celebrations with food into their daily lessons. For students with PWS, including food into the classroom may impede their learning and cause behavioral issues in all environments. Here are some helpful tips for the classroom:

- Provide food security. Food security means the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods with an assured ability to acquire these foods in socially acceptable ways. This means students with PWS will only access food during scheduled meals and snack times.
- Lock all access to food. This may include locking a teacher's desk or cabinets in the classroom that contain food items. It may also include putting other students' lunches into a locked container that is taken to the cafeteria for other students to access during their scheduled lunch time.
- Provide a structured predictable routine for all mealtimes
- Person with PWS should not be "punished" for obtaining unlocked food
- Food should not be used as a reward
- Provide close supervision or 1:1 adult support during the school day
- Provide an alternative setting for scheduled mealtimes if necessary

All students with PWS are different. There are some students that may be able to handle food exposure if extensive planning and preparation occurs in advance with the school team and the parents.

- Notify the parents in advance of food activities that will occur. For example, if a classroom pizza party is planned, the parent could send in an appropriate food replacement or a piece of pizza that follows the student's specific diet plan. Parents may also decide to make trade-offs so that the student can enjoy a special treat at school by adjusting the lunch or dinner menu.
- Prepare the student for food exposure that is not typical (field trips, special events, parties) by using visuals and schedules. The visuals should show exactly what food will be provided and at what time.

At the middle school and high school level, many students participate in classes focused on learning a range of daily living skills, including personal care, money skills, community use, and home living skills which encompass meal planning and preparation. While all of these areas are of value, community utilization, when it involves access to food, should be planned with attention to what the student with PWS can handle.

- If it's a field trip that includes a snack or lunch at a restaurant, the teacher should coordinate with the parent(s) regarding the details so a specific plan can be developed regarding exactly what food would be permitted and the degree of supervision required.
- If the class is focused on food planning and preparation, the teacher and parent(s) need to discuss what that would consist of and whether or not the student would be appropriate for such a class.
- If the food being prepared can be incorporated in the student's meal plan, perhaps there could be some degree of participation.
- Oftentimes an alternative activity is warranted; one which is meaningful for the student, so s/he doesn't feel like s/he is totally missing out!
- Students with PWS are not good candidates for vocational training experiences where food is involved or easily accessible. This includes restaurant work of any kind, grocery stores, food pantries, etc.
- Vocational activities that have been successful for persons with PWS include flower shops, pet stores (although pet food may be a temptation for some students), libraries or offices where clerical tasks are performed.
- Most workplaces have staff break rooms which must be carefully supervised when the student is in close proximity or is utilizing them.

Questions for School Teams

These questions are helpful to ask as a team when preparing to support a person with PWS in the school environment.

- Is there a breakfast program at the school where students eat in the classroom?
- Are there scheduled snack times in the classroom?
- Where are student lunches and snacks kept?
- Are students allowed to keep food, water or other liquids on their desk throughout the day?
- Do the teachers and support staff drink coffee, water, other liquids throughout the day?
- If food is kept in the classroom, is it locked in a cabinet?
- If the teacher keeps a food stash, is it locked in a drawer or cabinet?
- Does the school provide the snacks? What do they typically consist of?
- Is food used as rewards?
- Do classroom projects utilize food (macaroni pictures)?
- Are there any special classroom activities involving food: birthday parties, holiday parties (including Halloween), cultural celebrations involving food?
- Are there any field trips scheduled where food is available (zoo, shopping trips, restaurants)?
- Are cooking classes part of the curriculum?
- Does the school have an explicit policy against food sharing of any kind?

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