



MALORIE JUAREZ

KATIE EHLERS

TANIS RUSIN

KATIE BARTLING

ANNE REGO

KARLA AUSDERAU

Sharing a family meal at a local restaurant is an occupation many people take for granted. For some families who have children with special needs, though, the idea of going out to eat at a restaurant has long been forgotten or is altogether avoided. The physical and social barriers they encounter effectively bar them from participating in public dining establishments.

Sensory processing challenges, a factor in many feeding disorders, are more prevalent in children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) compared with typically developing children and children with developmental disabilities. Sensory challenges can be a primary barrier to a child's participation in family meals as the child may refuse to eat certain foods, have a limited diet, or demonstrate aversions to specific food characteristics, as noted by Ausderau and Juarez (2013) in *ICAN: Infant, Child, & Adolescent Nutrition*; and Schaaf, Toth-Cohen, Johnson, Out-

The goal is to not only have an environment in which families with special needs can eat and enjoy themselves, but also to offer a place where the community can gather for dinner together and learn to appreciate each individual's unique needs and experiences.

ten, and Benevides (2011) in *Autism*. During mealtimes, children with ASDs may also display disruptive behaviors, such as throwing tantrums, gagging with the presentation of foods, and/or throwing or dumping unwanted food, all of which may result in the need for extra supervision or eating separate from the rest of the family, as noted by Nadon, Feldman, Dunn, and Gisel (2011) in *Autism*; and Provost, Crowe, Osbourn, McClain, and Skipper (2010) in *Physical & Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*.

A variety of stimuli can impact eating behaviors for children with ASDs as they struggle with sensory modulation and the inability to either inhibit or respond to extraneous stimuli

appropriately. The multisensory atmosphere in restaurants is often noisy, bright, visually stimulating, and can be generally overwhelming for the child with ASDs. The unpredictability of the environmental stimulation in community dining makes it difficult for the family to establish routines and enjoy a meal outside of the home, as noted by Bagby, Dickie, and Baranek (2012) in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Additionally, families may refrain from participating in public activities because many members of the public do not understand or are unaware of the underlying cause of their child's atypical behaviors, such as tantrums or meltdowns, and do not sympathize. As

Creating a Sensory-Friendly Dining Experience for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Families

a result, families who do choose to eat in community settings feel their options are narrow and most frequently visit fast-food and drive-through eateries as opposed to sit-down restaurants, sacrificing an important form of community participation because they cannot anticipate and/or control the environment or feel a sense of acceptance in the community dining context, as noted by Provost et al. (2010) in *Physical & Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*.

SENSORY-FRIENDLY DINING

To address the issue of public dining among families of children with ASDs, occupational therapy students and faculty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and stakeholders collaborated with a local restaurant to evaluate and remove barriers to occupational participation and create a sensory-friendly dining atmosphere for a day. The goals of the event were to create an accepting environment for families with children with ASDs, improve community awareness and acceptance of these families in public eating establishments, and educate a public dining establishment's employees regarding how to accommodate persons with special needs. Culver's, a popular Midwestern family restaurant, agreed to host an event and create a space that would accommodate the special needs of families of children with ASDs while increasing the awareness of their other customers. Karl Pierick, father of a daughter with an ASD and a trainee in the Wisconsin Maternal and Child Health Leadership and Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) program at the Waisman

Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, helped organize the Sensory Friendly Family Night because of his family's first-hand experience encountering restaurant barriers. Pierick notes that his family "did not eat out at a restaurant until [his] daughter was 7 or 8 years old. It was too overwhelming, too loud and unpredictable." Working

as a team, the sensory friendly dining event became a reality through the collaborative efforts of Pierick, the UW–Madison occupational therapy students and faculty, and the staff of Culver's.

SETTING UP

The Culver's environment is an informal atmosphere that strikes a



Above: Emma Pierick enjoys her experience at the event.
Below: A separate dining area at the restaurant was turned into a "sensory break room," where families could attend to sensory or behavioral needs of the child. Here, twins take time out on a crash pillow.



Steps to “Eat Out!” in Your Community

Find a supportive venue...

Research family dining establishments in your area and reach out to them about your cause. Build collaborative relationships, based on open communication and a common desire to serve the community.

Reach out to organizations...

Contact local organizations that you think may be interested in physically helping or supporting your function. You never know who might be willing to contribute or advertise.

Advertise in the area...

Contact local agencies that may be willing to support your cause. Appropriate social media tools are increasingly popular avenues to circulate information regarding community events. Keep in mind that you do not want to over-circulate the event.

Provide training to staff...

Provide an easy-to-understand, one-page description of helpful training tips that are free of jargon. Provide additional resources if requested by the venue.

Set up the space...

Arrive early to organize tables and spaces so that they are easily accessible and socially inclusive. Place fliers and feedback questionnaires where people can easily see them. Label areas when appropriate, such as the sensory break room, so that families know where to find them.

Be present at the event...

Participate in the event and interact with families. Encourage employees. Show your support. Be flexible. Have fun!

Break down the data...

To provide beneficial events for families, gather data on the event's successes and areas for improvement. Be sure to use at least one measurement tool to gather information. Simple questionnaires with Likert scaling and a section for additional comments will provide sufficient information. Include time following the event for your team to discuss success and challenges of the event.

Strengths of the Culver's Event

- Children with ASDs and their families were able to dine and interact in a public social setting.
- The venue was supportive of the cause and willing to accommodate to make the experience successful for everyone.
- The environment was adaptable, which allowed appropriate modifications and space for a temporary sensory room.
- Community members gained increased awareness of ASDs.
- Parents and professionals collaborated throughout the event-planning process.
- A reoccurring community event has been established due to the event's success.

to decrease the sensory input in the environment. The overhead lighting was reduced, providing as much natural lighting as possible, and the background music was minimized. Community donations allowed for the transformation of a separate dining area into a “sensory break room,” where families could attend to sensory or behavioral needs of the child. A few sensory tools (e.g., crash pillow, fidget toys) were available for use in this space.

A driving force for the event was to increase community awareness, including restaurant employees, of the barriers that families with children with ASDs may face in participating in community activities, such as dining at restaurants. The team included Culver's employees by incorporating an educational component to the event. Educational materials for the Culver's staff were developed to provide a better understanding of common features associated with ASDs and suggestions on how to engage in successful interactions. Similar information was provided to all restaurant patrons through fliers placed on each table in the restaurant. (See “Helpful Employee Strategies.”)

Helpful Employee Strategies

Be patient...

Allow the individual at least 10 seconds to process what you're saying to him or her. This time will allow the person to respond without feeling overwhelmed with information.

Communicate clearly...

Speak in short, concrete sentences. Keep the information simple and direct, especially for children.

Stay calm...

A small change in the environment, which may seem minor or not easily recognizable to you, may impact a child and cause him or her to become upset. Help the situation by keeping *your* cool.

Be understanding...

A child may exhibit behaviors that do not make sense to you. Do your best to understand the situation and empathize.



balance between fast food and sit-down dining. Food is ordered at the counter but is made to order and then delivered to the table. Planners felt Culver's provided a frequently visited, family-friendly environment in which to host a sensory-friendly experience. The Culver's menu provides a wide

range of child-friendly foods with easily accessible information on common food allergens. Pictures are also provided with a number of the menu choices, increasing the accessibility of the menu to a variety of patrons.

On therapists' recommendations, the restaurant staff made adaptations

A successful sensory-friendly dining event for families of children with ASDs was achieved through environmental modifications, education, and community collaborations. In addition, a young adult social skills group used the event as an opportunity to practice ordering and dining in a restaurant. Some participants at the event, as well as other community members dining at Culver's (and aware of the event that night), participated in a brief survey following their meals. Culver's employees also provided feedback following the event. Participants reported they were able to enjoy a family or social meal in a sensory-friendly environment while feeling a sense of comfort that came with being in a place of tolerance and acceptance. Feedback from Culver's employees as well as regular customers suggested positive participation in the event. Specifically, the educational materials allowed employees to expand their knowledge and understanding of ASDs as well as gain tools for future interactions with families of children with special needs. The most important success was that families of children with ASDs were able to do what most other families love to do: enjoy a family meal at a local restaurant.

REPEAT BUSINESS

Because of the positive response to the event, the sensory friendly dining events will continue and will be developed as an ongoing event to meet the needs of families in the Madison community. The goal is to not only have an environment in which families with special needs can eat and enjoy themselves, but also to offer a place where the community can gather for dinner together and learn to appreciate each individual's unique needs and experiences. ■

Resources

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Malorie Juarez and **Katie Bartling** are occupational therapy students in the MS-OT Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who are currently completing their fieldwork. Both were MCH-LEND trainees at the Waisman Center.

Katie Ehlers, **Anne Rego**, and **Tanis Rusin** are second-year occupational therapy students in the MS-OT Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Ehlers and Rusin are both MCH-LEND trainees at the Waisman Center. Rego is a project assistant in the Family Mealtime and Autism Research Project.

Karla Ausderau, PhD, OTR/L, is an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Kinesiology Department, Occupational Therapy Program.

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