Feeding and Swallowing Problems in Children
What is a swallowing disorder?

• A swallowing disorder is also called dysphagia.
• The three phases of swallowing are the oral, pharyngeal, and esophageal phases.
• Your child can have a problem during one or more of these phases.
• Your child can also have feeding problems.
What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

• Oral phase problems include
  - trouble sucking from a bottle or breast
  - problems coordinating the suck-swallow-breathe cycle
  - problems closing the lips to get food from a spoon or fork or to keep food in the mouth
  - trouble chewing or moving food and liquid from the mouth to the throat
What is a swallowing disorder?
(continued)

• Oral phase problems include
  - not being able to control the food or liquid so that it goes into the throat too quickly
  - having some food left in the mouth after the swallow, called residue
  - getting food stuck in the cheek, called pocketing
Oral Phase
(Adult model for illustrative purposes)
What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

• Pharyngeal phase problems include
  - having a hard time starting a swallow
  - getting food or liquid into the airway, called aspiration
  - having some food or liquid stay in the throat after the swallow, called residue
Pharyngeal Phase
(Adult model for illustrative purposes)
What is a swallowing disorder? (continued)

• Esophageal phase problems include
  - food getting stuck as it moves from the throat into the esophagus
  - poor movement of the esophagus so food doesn’t pass easily into the stomach
  - food coming back up, called reflux
  - pockets in the esophagus that catch food and don’t let it go into the stomach
Esophageal Phase
(Adult model for illustrative purposes)
What is a feeding disorder?

• Your child may have trouble eating with his or her hands or from a spoon or fork.
• Your child may also
  - refuse certain foods, like crunchy or smooth foods
  - eat only certain foods, like french fries or pizza
  - gag easily when food is brought near the mouth
  - have trouble paying attention long enough to eat a meal
  - take a long time to eat – more than 30 minutes
What causes feeding and swallowing problems?

• In children, some causes are
  - problems with the nervous system from cerebral palsy or other disorders
  - gastrointestinal problems, like reflux
  - premature birth and low birth weight
  - heart problems
  - cleft lip or palate
  - breathing problems
  - developmental disorders, like autism or Down syndrome
What are the signs of feeding and swallowing problems?

• Your child may
  - Arch his or her back or stiffen up while feeding
  - become irritable or fall asleep while feeding
  - take a long time to eat (more than 30 minutes)
  - refuse different food textures (like crunchy or smooth foods)
  - drool or spill food or liquid from the mouth
What are the signs of feeding and swallowing problems? (continued)

• Your child may
  - sound gurgly or out of breath after eating
  - cough or gag during meals
  - get pneumonia or respiratory infections a lot
  - spit up or vomit after eating
  - not gain weight
What can happen if my child has a feeding or swallowing problem?

Children need food to grow and develop. A child who has trouble eating may

- not get enough food and water to stay healthy
- not grow the way he or she should
- be at risk for food going into the airway, called aspiration
- get pneumonia or respiratory infections
- not like to eat in front of others
What help is available?

• You should talk with your child’s doctor if you have concerns about how he or she is eating.
• A speech-language pathologist, or SLP, can test your child to see what kinds of problems he or she is having.
• The SLP can work with you and your child to find ways to make eating more enjoyable and safe.
How can an SLP help my child?

- The SLP may
  - talk to you about what problems your child is having and what he or she does well
  - talk with your child’s doctor about any medical problems
  - see how your child can move the muscles of his or her mouth
  - watch your child eat and drink
  - do other tests to see what is happening when your child swallows
How can an SLP help my child? (continued)

• Treatment will be different for every child and may include
  - exercises to help your child move his or her mouth better for chewing and swallowing
  - getting your child to try different positions for eating
  - getting your child to try different foods
  - trying different food textures, bottles, cups, spoons, or
  - other techniques to help your child eat safely
What can I do to help?

• As parents and caregivers you can help by
  - asking questions to make sure that you understand what kinds of problems your child is having
  - make sure you understand the treatment plan
  - go to therapy with your child and follow up at home with any recommendations
  - talk with your child’s daycare or school teachers about your child’s feeding and swallowing and what they can do to help
How can an SLP help my child? (continued)

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How can I find an SLP?

• Look for an SLP with the Certificate of Clinical Competence from ASHA.
• The SLP will have “CCC-SLP” after his or her name.
• Go to the ASHA Web site at www.asha.org and click on “Find a Professional” at the top of the page.
• Call ASHA at (800) 638-8255 or e-mail actioncenter@asha.org
For more information

• To learn more about feeding and swallowing problems and what SLPs do, go to ASHA’s Web site at www.asha.org/public.