

# Title | NUTRITIONAL CARE FOR CHILDREN WITH FEEDING DIFFICULTIES AND DISABILITIES: A SCOPING REVIEW

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22ND IUNS-ICN  
INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF  
NUTRITION IN TOKYO, JAPAN  
DECEMBER 6-11, 2022

Poster No. PAB(T3)-64

## KEY TAKE-AWAY

**Current policies and programs provide insufficient nutritional support to children with feeding difficulties and disabilities.**

## BACKGROUND

Children with disabilities are at significantly higher risk of poor nutrition and mortality due to malnutrition compared to children without disabilities. Feeding difficulties, stigma, and neglect increase this risk. The prevalence of feeding difficulties is 25 to 45 percent among children without disabilities and up to 80 percent among children with disabilities. To address these concerns, USAID Advancing Nutrition conducted a scoping review of opportunities to improve nutritional care for children with feeding difficulties and disabilities.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The scoping review comprised a desk review of peer-reviewed and gray literature, including project reports, briefs, and evaluations; existing intervention tools; and key informant interviews with experts in nutrition and disability.

The desk review focused on children zero to five years, with literature on breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices in low- and middle-income countries. We identified resources through Google Scholar, outreach to working groups and key informants, and programmatic databases such as the Emergency Nutrition Network database. The review comprised 127 documents (66 percent research articles and books, 16 percent program resources, and 9 percent unpublished documents).

A purposive sampling approach identified experts in nutrition, feeding difficulties, and disabilities for 42 key informant semi-structured interviews with individuals and organizational groups.

## FINDINGS

SECTOR	GAP
<b>Governance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lack of inclusive policies and programs</li><li>• Nonprofit organizations (NGOs)/civil society organizations fund and provide disability services instead of governments</li></ul>
<b>Information systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Disability-disaggregated data not available in nutrition and health services</li></ul>
<b>Financing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inadequate funding for disability specific-programming</li></ul>
<b>Service delivery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children with disabilities, many of whom have feeding difficulties, may not be included in routine nutrition services</li><li>• Missed opportunities for early identification and intervention for feeding and nutrition and lack of follow-up structures</li><li>• Where they exist, rehabilitation services are often of poor quality and do not address feeding challenges</li><li>• Lack of guidelines and tools to address feeding difficulties and malnutrition among children with disabilities</li></ul>
<b>Medicines and technology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited availability of assistive products to support feeding in the health system as they are not prioritized by governments or locally produced</li></ul>
<b>Workforce</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited skills and in-service training opportunities related to feeding difficulties or supporting children with disabilities among primary health care workers</li><li>• Lack of specialized workforce and job pipelines for rehabilitation trainees</li><li>• Stigma and attitudinal barriers among health providers</li></ul>

**“If this message of social inclusion can be spread, then tomorrow we will not have people and society that stigmatize persons with disabilities. This younger generation, these young trees, will grow knowing that having a disability is normal, that I need to support my friend with a disability. So then inclusion is not an issue. The problem is the grown up trees are hard to change; they do not accept.”**

— Director of an organization of persons with disabilities



**“It is a self-fulfilling prophecy: health workers don’t treat the child with a disability because they say the child is just going to die. And of course they die because their malnutrition went unaddressed.”** — Disability researcher

## CALL TO ACTION

- **Build the evidence base** on interventions to identify and support children with feeding difficulties, disabilities, and their families. Ensure inclusion of data on these children in routine programming.
- **Strengthen systems** to improve identification of and services for children with feeding difficulties and disabilities. In particular, ensure wasting treatment programs include guidance for children with feeding difficulties and disabilities.
- **Provide direct support** to families to address social determinants that impact nutrition outcomes for children with feeding difficulties and disabilities.
- **Raise awareness** of the need and opportunities to support children with feeding difficulties and disabilities.

Learn more: [advancingnutrition.org/disability-toolkit](https://advancingnutrition.org/disability-toolkit)



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This poster was produced for the U. S. Agency for International Development. It was prepared under the terms of contract 7200AA18C00070 awarded to JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. The contents are the responsibility of JSI and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the U.S. Government.