

# WIC for Autistic Children and Their Families: Benefits, Needs, and Challenges

FROM THE FOOD & COMMUNITIES STUDY OF EXPERIENCES OF CAREGIVERS USING WIC

## What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder, commonly referred to as Autism or ASD, is a developmental disorder characterized by challenges with social interactions and communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviors and interests.

## What is WIC?

WIC is USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. WIC provides **eligible low-income families**, including pregnant or breastfeeding women and children under age five, with **access to specified, healthy foods**. WIC also offers nutrition education and support.

## Benefits of WIC:

Studies of WIC participation find that it's associated with **better diet**, including higher intake of iron, higher consumption of fruits and vegetables, more variety of foods consumed, and lower added sugar intake. Research on WIC participants has also shown that WIC **reduces food insecurity, improves birth outcomes, protects against obesity, and supports learning and development.**

## The Food & Communities Study:

Food & Communities is a large mixed-methods study with the goal of identifying opportunities to optimize WIC implementation to ensure healthy growth for low-income children. The study included focus groups with caregivers from low-income families to better understand their decisions around food purchasing as it relates to WIC. **Several caregivers in these groups discussed the challenges of using WIC to feed their autistic children.**



## QUOTES FROM CAREGIVERS IN THE FOOD & COMMUNITIES STUDY:



"He only has a handful of things that he's willing to eat, and that makes it a little bit more difficult"

"My youngest **child has a texture problem**. He's about to be two and he's still only eats-- he still only eats whole milk and baby food. He doesn't eat solid foods yet."

"He still is on baby cereal, but of course, that came off of the WIC checks after he was a year old... so **I just buy it out of my pocket**... they have, I guess, you know their own guidelines for when foods are allowed to be on or taken off and I was just wondering why they're very strict about that, even if you still need a certain item, like the child is-- he's delayed. So he doesn't talk. **He has texture issues with his food and I just feed him what he eats because he needs to eat something**"

# WHY MIGHT IT BE HARDER FOR FAMILIES OF AUTISTIC CHILDREN TO USE THEIR WIC BENEFITS?

## Food-related experiences and behaviors common among autistic children:

- **Gastrointestinal Symptoms:** issues with the digestive system, such as constipation, diarrhea, and abdominal pain.
- **Sensory Sensitivity:** heightened or diminished responses to sensory input, including tactile input such as the textures of food.
- **Food Selectivity:** food refusal or restricted food preferences, especially the avoidance of one or more entire food groups.
- **Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID):** a clinical form of food selectivity where the avoidance or restriction of food prevents an individual from meeting nutritional standards.

## Challenges related to using WIC benefits:

WIC provides participants with support for the purchase of highly specific foods, including pre-selected sizes and brands. This can make it difficult for caregivers to use WIC benefits to shop for their autistic children, as autistic children often have restricted food preferences, which may not be included in the WIC package.

*"My son is autistic, so **there are just some things that he just simply will not eat**, so it's just like the things that he feels comfortable eating, his safe food... When it comes to textures, things like that, if he doesn't like the way it feels in his mouth, he don't like the way it is, he'll start spitting stuff out of his mouth in a heartbeat"*

*(Caregiver, Food & Communities Study)*

# WHAT CAN WIC DO FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES?



Caregivers in the Food & Communities focus groups expressed the need for greater flexibility in their food packages and support from WIC staff to better meet the nutritional needs of their autistic children. Based on caregiver input and preexisting research, we recommend:

## For WIC Employees:

- Assign Risk Code 362 to children with ASD diagnoses; this will satisfy WIC's "nutritional risk" eligibility requirement.
- Provide resources to caregivers who would like to have their children tested for ASD.
- Provide tips for sensory sensitivity, such as blending food for children sensitive to tactile input.
- Instruct families seeking supplemental drinks for their child to speak to their doctor about providing a "WIC Formula Request".

## For Policy Makers:

- Expand food choices and package flexibility for food-selective children.
- Extend WIC coverage until a child's 6th birthday, as autistic children often start school later.
- Incorporate education on autism, sensory sensitivity, and food selectivity into the training for all WIC employees.

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