

# Escaping the Vicious Cycle: Inclusive Nutrition for Children with Disabilities is Non-Negotiable



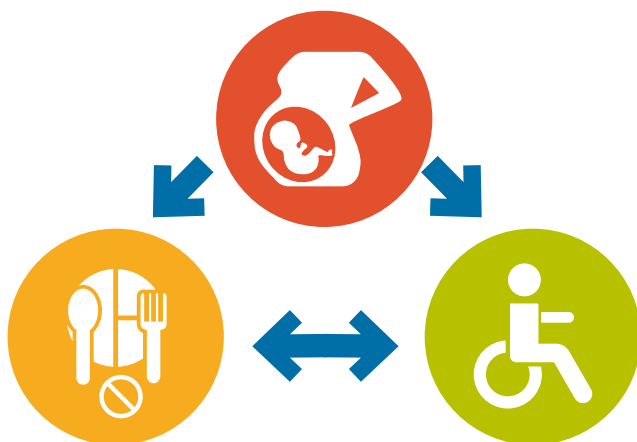
Children with disabilities face disproportionately high rates of malnutrition worldwide. Barriers related to feeding difficulties, social exclusion, poverty, institutionalization, lack of caregiver support and limited access to disability-informed services place them at significantly greater risk of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and growth faltering.

Without targeted and inclusive nutrition strategies, these children are too often left behind. There is an urgent need for inclusive nutrition systems that address the unique feeding, health, and developmental needs of children with disabilities. Nutrition is not simply a health intervention; it is foundational to survival, dignity, and lifelong potential.

## Why Inclusive Nutrition Matters

Malnutrition can both contribute to and result from disability, creating a dangerous cycle:

Poor maternal and early childhood nutrition increases the risk of developmental delays



Access to adequate, appropriate and safe foods and supportive mealtimes is limited

Malnutrition exacerbates cognitive and physical impairments

## Nutritional Risks and Developmental Consequences

Good nutrition during the first **1,000** days of life, and throughout childhood, is essential for physical growth, brain development, immune function, and educational attainment. For children with disabilities, ensuring adequate nutritional support is significantly harder to achieve, and the consequences of falling short are severe.

Research through Holt programs found that among children with disabilities:

**74%** have feeding difficulties and more than 5 times the adjusted risk of having a feeding difficulty than children without disabilities

**40%** are malnourished, experiencing high undernutrition and overnutrition

**25%** higher odds of getting sick than children without a disability who are malnourished

**↑** Higher risk of chronic undernutrition, stunting and micronutrient deficiencies

**×** Frequent exclusion from mainstream nutrition and health services

# Why Systems Often Fail Children with Disabilities



Budget constraints, poor dietary diversity and inadequate intake



Weak integration between disability and nutrition and health services



Lack of Individualized care and monitoring



Social stigma and exclusion



Inadequate caregiver training and support

## Implications and Necessary Policy Actions

To ensure all children's needs are met, governments and development partners should:



### Recognize Inclusive Nutrition as a Right

Affirm that children with disabilities have an equal right to adequate, appropriate, and accessible nutrition services.



### Integrate Disability into National Nutrition Strategies

Embed disability-specific indicators and inclusive practices within national nutrition plans and monitoring systems.



### Strengthen Caregiver Capacity

Fund training programs on:

- Responsive and adaptive feeding to support safe swallowing and enjoyable mealtimes
- Age-appropriate nutrition for various impairments
- Hygiene and infection prevention
- Caregiver well-being and support



### Implement Individualized Growth Monitoring

Ensure regular anthropometric and developmental screenings that include nutrition and feeding considerations.



### Promote Family-Based Care

Prioritize deinstitutionalization and family strengthening, recognizing that children thrive in safe, nurturing families supported with inclusive services.



### Increase Funding for Specialized Support

- Provide resources for dietary diversity ensuring adequate micronutrients, nutrition and feeding practices
- Ensure access to multidisciplinary therapeutic support
- Supply adaptive equipment for feeding and daily activities



### Ensure Data Disaggregation

Collect and analyze nutrition data disaggregated by disability status to inform equitable programming.

## Call to Action

Children with disabilities are among the most nutritionally vulnerable and the most overlooked. Inclusive nutrition is not optional; it is essential to achieve global development goals and the rights of every child. **Investing in inclusive nutrition systems ensures that children with disabilities can grow, learn, and reach their full potential.**