

A Survey of UK Special School Speech & Language Therapists (SLT) and School Staff Regarding the Use of Mealtime Mats to Provide Eating and Drinking Guidelines

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Abstract

Purpose: Mealtime mats are recommended to support people with learning disabilities and dysphagia. This survey explored their use by special school staff and Speech & Language Therapists (SLT).

Method: Two questionnaires were developed to collect experiences of creating and using mealtime mats within UK special schools, including benefits and disadvantages of this method, training provided and improvement suggestions. SLTs (11) responded *via* an online survey, while education staff members of a UK special school (25) completed paper-based questionnaires. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and reviewing free text comments.

Results: SLTs reported usage of mealtime mats with many utilizing similar formats and areas of advice covered. Some aspects received less focus e.g. communication and environment. SLTs reported difficulties in continuing to provide mealtime mats, despite being positive about their implementation, due to increased service pressures. This was often without active evaluation of the effectiveness of mealtime mats. Only 2 school staff members reported using mealtime mats and these documents had a different name. Other school staffs were aware of the mats but did not support children with complex dysphagia. However they reported that a mealtime mat resource for children with autism would be beneficial.

Conclusions: This survey has shown that mealtime mats are being implemented within UK special schools and are viewed positively. However there is variety in usage in terms of name, format, content and evaluation. Research to determine the effectiveness of mealtime mats in special schools and other settings, including how to implement them, would be beneficial.

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