The Importance of Individualized Programs
The current research on the available techniques to improve the feeding and eating abilities of children with cerebral palsy is very contradictory. This is because cerebral palsy is different in everyone. Your child may need a combination of different therapies or dietary changes to achieve the desired outcomes (weight gain, improved nutrition, improved eating abilities). Always be supportive of your child but remember to be realistic about his or her possible outcomes depending on the level of impairment. Lastly, research has shown that failure to grow is more associated with lack of food intake not increased work from spasticity. It has been shown that as the severity of cerebral palsy increases, so does risk for feeding problems.

Next Line of Treatment:
Therapies for increased control of eating include:

Oral Sensorimotor Management
- Teaching how to move the tongue (can include placing peanut butter in different areas of the mouth)
- Teaching correct lip closure (can include wrapping lips around a straw and suckling in and blowing)
- Teaching of “chewing vigor” (can be done by placing food on the back molars, alternating sides of the mouth. The child must chew the piece of food quickly)
- There have been conflicting results showing effectiveness and ineffectiveness of this technique

Last Line of Treatment
The use of a feeding tube has been shown to help children who cannot physically eat to increase in body weight.

Nasogastric Tubes
Placement of feeding tube through the nose. Used before gastrostomy insertion.

Gastrostomy
External opening into the stomach to allow food delivery directly to the stomach. Found to help those who are wheel-chair bound or who are unable to swallow. Warnings: watch for infection, work with dietician to determine best food formula to use, clean regularly.
Correct nutrition is important in all individuals. Children with Cerebral Palsy tend to struggle with getting adequate nutrition as a result of eating problems often present in cerebral palsy. This can lead to stunted growth, decreased strength, and much frustration on the part of the your child and you.

What are some of the problems that can result in this?

- Problems using the tongue correctly
- Inability to close the mouth fully
- Increased sensitivity to textured foods
- Incorrect timing of swallowing
- Reduced movement of the pharynx (refer to diagram above for placement of pharynx)
- Weakness in sucking with the mouth
- Poor posture during mealtime

Most problems associated with eating occur within what is known as the Upper Respiratory Tract. If food is lodged or breathed in, it can cause choking in the child. The diagram to the left shows where the main areas of problem are. Additionally, if the tongue or lip muscles don’t work properly, it may result in problems with eating and swallowing.

What Should I Do to Help My Child?

Watch for these signs:
- Mealtime lasting longer than 30-45 minutes
- Stress of you or your child during mealtime
- None or decreased weight gain or inadequate weight
- Recurring respiratory problems such as diagnosed respiratory illnesses or gurgly voice
- Spilling food out of the mouth

What Should I Do if my Child Shows these?

Talk with a dietician and physical therapist about helping your child. Treatment may include practicing control of muscles used to eat (oral sensorimotor therapy) or implant of assistive device such as gastrostomy.

Suggestions for Help and What the Research Says

First Line of Treatment:
If your child is able to eat on his or her own try these suggestions first:
- Make sure the child has good posture. You may need to physically assist this.
- Use “adaptive feeding” utensils such as no slip mats, utensils with hand grips, etc.
- Try giving your child small but frequent meals.
- Increase the child’s fat intake; this will increase energy without increasing the amount of food. Fat has more energy per gram compared to carbohydrates and protein.
- Still include protein with each meal (such as legumes, eggs, meat).

If these don’t help your child reach a healthy weight, consider using dietary supplements (after consulting with a dietician), such as protein powders, Pediasure, etc.