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Reasons the Same Diet Doesn't Work for Every Child

What to know before you try removing certain foods, such as a gluten-free casein-free diet, or adding supplements. Every child's biology is different, and here is why.



Includes 3 kid-friendly recipes

Written by Julie Matthews, Certified Nutrition Consultant

A parent guide · Wellness information, not medical advice

Why this matters to families with neurodevelopmental challenges

Maybe you heard from a parent that a gluten-free and casein-free diet was amazing for their child, while another parent said it didn't help at all. Perhaps a family member gave you information on how a particular supplement is supposed to work wonders. Everyone seems to think they know the best approach that you must do. But do they? Not really, not for every kid, anyway.

It can become very confusing. You try some diet changes or add some supplements. One nutrition intervention seems to have no benefit, or you can't tell if it's helping. With another, you suspect it could be making things worse. Now you wonder, is this a sign that I should push through, as some people are telling me, or an indication to stop.

It's typically not that these are bad approaches. In fact, there is buzz about them because typically they are genuinely helpful to some children. What is rarely mentioned is that they might not be the right approach for your child. Not every child with a particular diagnosis or neurodevelopmental delay benefits from the same approach.



The goal is not to address the diagnosis, but to address the biological pattern that underlies the diagnosis and symptoms.

Diet and nutritional interventions address certain underlying factors. The GFCF diet, zinc, probiotics, or vitamins help some individuals because they address the particular biochemical situation that child has. If that pattern isn't what's driving things for your child, the diet or supplement won't do much, no matter how much it's helped other children.

Five patterns, not one right answer

This guide isn't here to tell you which diet or nutritional approach is "right." It's here to walk you through the five biological patterns that actually determine whether a given approach may help. So instead of guessing your way through months of trial and error, you know what to look for first.

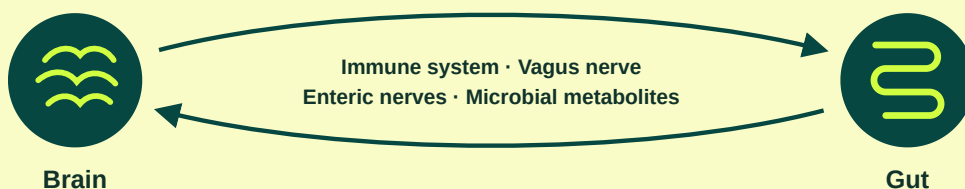
Every child is different: different histories, genetics, and biology. These factors are what shape their symptoms and condition, and that's exactly why the same diet or supplement can help one child and do nothing for another.

While the specifics vary from child to child, there are five identifiable and common biological patterns or systems often seen in children with neurological and neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD, autism, and anxiety. Each one can drive its own set of symptoms, and many children with neurodevelopmental conditions have one or a few of these patterns at play.

These systems don't operate in isolation. They influence each other, share some of the same underlying nutrients, and can produce overlapping symptoms, which is part of what makes this so hard to untangle from the outside.

How this guide is ordered

We start with the gut, since it has ripple effects across several of the other systems, then move through nutrient status, brain chemistry, and energy production, before ending with detoxification and inflammation.



The gut and the brain send signals in both directions, by at least four known routes. Cryan et al., Physiological Reviews, 2019.

Let's start with the first.

1

REASON ONE

Gut and microbial imbalance

Certain foods affect some kids more than others

Does this sound familiar?

- ☐ Your child seems dazed or "spaced out," or runs around bumping into furniture almost like they are intoxicated, for no clear reason.
- ☐ Your child may have diarrhea, constipation, gas or bloating, and you can't figure out why.
- ☐ They eat healthy, with lots of vegetables and fiber and not too much sugar, but they are always craving sugar and carbs.

The gut and microbiome can have a strong influence on the brain. In fact, the gut is often called the second brain. Digestive disorders and an imbalanced gut microbiome can negatively affect mood, focus, and thinking. New research, particularly in autism spectrum disorder, has found that gastrointestinal conditions are common and the microbiome is different.

Microbial imbalances include yeast and bacterial overgrowth. This means cookies, bread, breakfast cereal, sugar-sweetened drinks, and other sugar and flour containing foods can negatively affect some children more than others.

Yeast feeds on sugar and refined carbohydrates, and can cause symptoms like being "spaced out."

Harmful bacteria can cause real injury to the gut and significant digestive symptoms, as well as negative effects on mood and behavior that we will discuss in Reason 3. Additionally, in some cases it isn't which bacteria are present, but where they are located.

This is exactly why common one-size-fits-all gut advice may not help, and may even make symptoms worse. For example, fiber is often recommended to feed beneficial bacteria, and for many kids that's true. But if the bacteria are harmful, or normal bacteria have overgrown in the wrong place, that same fiber can feed the problem instead.

A craving pattern or a stubborn digestive symptom is a good starting clue. Knowing which imbalance is behind it is what tells you what to do next.

2

REASON TWO

Nutrient status

Why vitamins help some kids and do nothing for others

Does this sound familiar?

- ☐ Your child eats fruits and vegetables, takes a multivitamin, and still seems to be missing something.
- ☐ They are slow to heal from scrapes, catch every cold that goes around, or have restless or poor-quality sleep with no clear cause.

Vitamins and minerals are the raw materials the body uses for nearly everything, including energy, focus, mood, behavior, and growth. A deficiency in the wrong one, even a mild one, can quietly show up as symptoms that look more behavioral or developmental than nutritional, such as irritability, hyperactivity, anxiety, low energy, and inattentiveness.

Vitamin B12 is one clear example. Too little B12 and a child can experience the kind of dips that get missed as "just how he is," when they're actually a fixable gap.

Too little B12 can cause dips in mood, energy, and cognitive clarity.

Here's the part that surprises a lot of parents: a nutrient shortfall isn't always about adequate intake. It can come from digestion or gut issues getting in the way of absorption, as we just covered, or from the body using up a nutrient faster than usual to manage a process like inflammation.

If the real problem is absorption or a faster-than-normal drain on a nutrient, adding more of it without addressing why isn't likely to close the gap. This also works in reverse: understanding which nutrients are low can point back to what else might be going on in the body.

Sometimes it's a true deficiency. Sometimes it's more of an insufficiency, not quite low enough to cause an obvious problem, but still not enough for things to run well. Either way, it's not always something you can guess from diet alone.

3

REASON THREE

Dopamine-axis neurotransmitter metabolism

Why mood and focus don't track with diet as expected

Does this sound familiar?

- ☐ Your child struggles to focus on anything that isn't immediately engaging, but can also seem wired or restless.
- ☐ They've been having angry outbursts, irritability, or rage that flares up for no clear reason.
- ☐ They're stuck on the same repetitive behaviors, and you've heard "it's a dopamine thing" without ever being told what that means.

Dopamine is a brain chemical involved in focus, motivation, and mood. The common assumption is that low dopamine causes attention and mood issues, and while it's part of the picture, it's not the whole story. Low dopamine can look like poor focus and motivation. High dopamine can result in irritability or rage.

So what drives these differences? In Reason 1 we discussed certain harmful bacteria being high. This can include clostridia, a type of bacteria that produce chemicals which block the enzyme responsible for clearing dopamine out of the system. When that step is blocked, dopamine can build up.

Too much dopamine can contribute to irritability, agitation, and anxiety.

Conversely, producing enough dopamine requires specific nutrients, including vitamin B6. A child low in B6, even with a healthy diet, may not be able to produce dopamine efficiently, regardless of what's happening with gut bacteria.

That means two kids with the same "focus and mood" symptoms could have opposite underlying issues. One a conversion problem, one a production problem. And they would need opposite kinds of support.

4

REASON FOUR

Mitochondrial and energy

Chronic low energy despite diet changes

Does this sound familiar?

- ☐ Your child eats reasonably well and gets enough sleep, but seems chronically wiped out.
- ☐ They need more rest than normal, or are tired by mid-morning, or after a minor activity.

Food isn't energy by itself. While food certainly supplies the nutrients needed for energy, it must be converted into energy inside the cell, specifically in the mitochondria.

There are two reasons this might not be happening well. The first is that there may not be enough nutrients to produce energy. The second is that the mitochondria may not be running efficiently. A child might have other processes, such as inflammation and oxidative stress, or a blockage in the pathway that's getting in the way.

Mitochondrial markers may indicate less efficient energy metabolism, which can be associated with low stamina, difficulty getting going in the morning, and cognitive fatigue.

The mitochondria require B vitamins, especially B2, B3 and B5, along with CoQ10, carnitine, and alpha-lipoic acid. A healthy diet containing fruits, vegetables and protein still might be short on some of these. And when inflammation or oxidative stress is placing extra demand on the body, it may need more of them than a typical diet can supply.

General "eat healthier" advice doesn't target either of these specifically. You need to know whether it's a nutrient gap, a functioning problem, or both, because the answer is different for each.

5

REASON FIVE

Methylation, detoxification and inflammation

Why some children react bigger to everyday exposures

Does this sound familiar?

- ☐ Your child reacts strongly to things other kids barely notice, like a whiff of perfume, cleaning products, or a musty room.
- ☐ They deal with allergies or histamine-type reactions that seem more intense than expected.
- ☐ They seem to run "inflamed," showing up as skin issues, congestion, or crankiness with no obvious trigger.

These responses can reflect how well your child's body is clearing out what it doesn't need, the process of detoxification, and how efficiently it's managing methylation, a related biochemical process involved in everything from neurotransmitter regulation to how genes get expressed.

Some kids clear things efficiently and their inflammatory response settles quickly. Other children have a detox system that runs more slowly, so everyday exposures cause larger reactions.

Glutathione is the body's master antioxidant. When it isn't available in adequate amounts, your child's body can show signs of that strain.

Glutathione relies on adequate methylation, the biochemical process that comes before glutathione production. And these pathways depend on many of the same nutrients you just read about: B12, B6, B2, folate, and magnesium.

This is also where the pieces start to connect. Yeast and bacterial byproducts, dopamine metabolism, and energy production all place demand on this same system. A child dealing with more than one of these reasons at once may be asking their body to do a lot while it's already stretched thin, which is part of why symptoms can look bigger than any one issue would explain on its own.

Other barriers: it's not all biological

Everything so far has been about biology. That's important, but it's not the whole picture.

Some of what makes this hard isn't in your child's biochemistry. It's in the sheer volume of advice, half of it contradicting the other half, that makes every decision feel like a gamble. It's in the guilt that shows up when a diet everyone swore by does nothing, or makes things worse, and some part of you wonders if you did it wrong, picked the wrong plan, didn't try hard enough.

If a diet didn't work, that's usually a sign it wasn't the right approach at the right time for your child. Not a sign you failed at following it.

Does this sound familiar?

- ☐ You haven't started anything yet, because it feels like too much all at once.
- ☐ The fear of another attempt that goes nowhere, the birthday parties and holidays that get harder, a partner who isn't convinced it's worth trying.
- ☐ Some part of you doubts it'll actually make a difference.

Not starting isn't failing. It's often just being too overwhelmed to know where the next step even is.

There's also the day-to-day weight of it. Reading every label. Tracking every reaction. Feeling worn down by it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. It means you're carrying something with real-life challenges.

None of this cancels out the biology. It sits alongside it. You don't have to have this all figured out, and you don't have to carry the exhaustion of it by yourself, to be doing right by your child.

These patterns can be tested

By now you've seen the pattern: gut microbial overgrowth, nutrient status, dopamine-axis metabolism, mitochondrial energy, and methylation, detoxification and inflammation. Five different biological patterns, with different signs and contributing factors. Each responds to a different approach. They can also influence each other, share similar deficiencies, and have overlapping symptoms.

Your child likely doesn't have all five, but may have one or several that are driving core symptoms. And all children with the same diagnosis don't have the same contributing factors.

That's the real reason the same diet, or the same supplement, doesn't work for every kid. It was never about finding the one right approach everyone else swears by. It was about finding the right approach for what's actually happening in your child's body. And guessing at that from the outside, one diet or supplement at a time, can take months, or years.

This is exactly what testing is built to shortcut. An Organic Acids Test looks at the biological patterns we just walked through, and helps show which ones may be in play for your child.



The Kite Health kit arrives at your door. One sample, collected at home, no blood draw.

Important

An Organic Acids Test is a wellness tool, not a medical one. It does not identify autism, ADHD, or any other condition. It helps you and your child's care team understand biological patterns that may be contributing to symptoms.

Practical steps you can take today

Do this

Start with [Kite Health](#)'s at-home test. From a single sample, it checks all five patterns in this guide and more: gut and microbial health, mitochondrial energy, neurotransmitter metabolism, detox and inflammation, and nutrient status. It interprets the results for you and turns them into a foundational personalized action plan you can start on right away, and bring to your child's care team.

Tiny start

Not ready for testing yet, or just need a place to begin? Start small.

- Cut out artificial food dyes and additives for a week, and see what you notice.
- Swap one sugary snack a day for a whole-food option, without overhauling anything else.
- Keep a simple three-day diet journal of what your child eats and how they are afterward: mood, focus, energy, digestion.

If it gets too tricky

Plans get sidetracked. That doesn't mean you've failed or lost progress.

- If it feels like too much right now, testing can wait. Understanding what's going on doesn't expire.
- If a new food gets rejected, it's okay to pause and try again another time. Repeated small exposures matter more than one perfect attempt.
- If tracking meals feels like too much, just write down what you notice when something seems significant.

Kid-friendly healthy recipes



Banana Oat Muffins

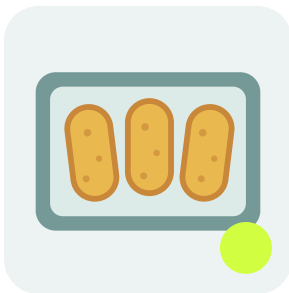
Gluten-free, dairy-free, naturally sweetened. Makes about 9.

YOU NEED

1 1/2 cups old-fashioned rolled oats (certified gluten-free) · 2 very ripe bananas, mashed · 2 eggs · 2 tbsp melted coconut oil · 1 tsp baking powder · 1/2 tsp cinnamon · pinch of salt

METHOD

Heat oven to 350°F. Blend the oats until they form a fine flour. Add everything else and blend until smooth. Let the batter rest 10 to 15 minutes so the oats absorb the liquid and the muffins hold together. Stir once more, divide into a lined muffin tin, and bake 18 to 20 minutes until a toothpick comes out clean.



Crispy Baked Chicken Tenders

Gluten-free, dairy-free, kid-approved texture.

YOU NEED

1 lb chicken tenders · 1 cup gluten-free breadcrumbs · 1 egg, beaten · 1/2 tsp garlic powder · 1/4 tsp salt

METHOD

Heat oven to 400°F. Season the breadcrumbs with the garlic powder and salt. Dip each tender in egg, then coat in the seasoned breadcrumbs. Place on a baking sheet and bake 18 to 20 minutes, flipping halfway, until golden and cooked through.



No-Bake Energy Bites

Sweetened with dates only.

YOU NEED

1 cup pitted dates · 1 cup unsweetened shredded coconut · 2 tbsp sunflower seed butter · 1 tbsp chia seeds (optional)

METHOD

Pulse all the ingredients in a food processor until it forms a sticky dough. Roll into small balls and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.

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About the author



Julie Matthews is a certified nutrition consultant with a master's degree in medical nutrition from Arizona State University's College of Health Solutions. She has specialized in nutrition for children with neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions for more than twenty years, and sits on the Nutritional and Medical Advisory Board of the Autism Nutrition Research Center. She is the author of *The Personalized Autism Nutrition Plan*, published in March 2025, and her training courses and nutrition programs reach families and clinicians in over 140 countries.

Find her at personalizedautismnutritionplan.com

Read more: [ASU News profile, June 2025](#)

A note on this guide

[Kite Health](#) is a wellness service, not a medical one. Nothing in this guide replaces your child's doctor or care team, and it is not intended to identify any condition. Always talk with your child's care team before making changes to diet or supplements.