

Helping Parents Make a Difference

Getting Children to Take Supplements

By Lori Knowles



Starting nutritional supplement therapy with children can be very stressful for parents. Children with developmental disabilities (such as ADD/HD, Autism, Sensory Integration Dysfunction, etc) may be required by physicians to take anywhere from 6 to 20 different nutritional supplements each day. This can be overwhelming to parents, especially when their children do not swallow pills and strongly resist being forced to consume anything that is not of their choosing.

Many parents ask me about products in chewable or liquid form. Although there are a few good liquid and/or chewable supplement products available that are appropriate for kids with autism/special needs, they can be expensive and children can still object to the taste.

Below are some suggestions that have been tried and true to help overcome the problem of running away, clenched teeth, and spitting back out what is put into their mouths. Whether the supplements you are giving are in capsule, liquid, or chewable form, following these six steps should help with getting your child to comply.

1. Take a No-Nonsense Approach. Give supplements with the same level of intensity that you use to give them a life-saving medication. Your child needs these supplements to support their brain, immune system and overall nutritional status. Your child can sense when you mean business and you cannot allow them to think that taking their supplements is optional.
2. Do not mix into food or drink and pretend that it's not there! This only works if you are adding only one or two tasteless supplements. Even if they can't taste it, they may choose not to finish the drink or food that it's mixed in and the child is not getting everything they need. As you add more needed supplements to their regimen, hiding them in food will eventually backfire. The last thing we want children who are picky eaters to do is to stop eating because they are suspicious of what may have been added to their food.
3. Choose the Best Method for your Child to Administer Supplements. You need to take into effect the sensory/swallowing issues that your child has. Does your child do better with liquids or semi-solids? The two most common mediums in which to mix supplements are fruit purees or liquids.

Fruit purees/baby food: I chose baby food as a way to get supplements into my child because he loved the fruit purees as a baby – especially the peaches. The tartness of the peaches is especially good because it masks the taste of a lot of supplements – especially the B vitamins. I sometime rotated with pears and applesauce as well. I would recommend using organic baby food or making your own because of pesticide residues in these foods. Open up each capsule and mix in into the fruit puree of choice (1-2 tbsp). Add one drop of stevia to sweeten and additionally mask the supplement taste, if needed.

Liquids: For children who have a problem with the taste and texture of fruit purees, use a tart or strong juice and pour a small amount (1-2 tbsp) into a bowl. Open up and empty supplement capsules into the bowl and mix well with your finger to dissolve as much as possible. While the mixture is still swirling, use a large syringe to suck up the supplement mixture. If possible, use only enough liquid to fill one syringe, two at most. Some examples of juices/liquids that parents

are using to mix supplements in include: pear, pineapple, orange, grape, Sunny Delight, water, or a small amount of favorite soda. It is recommended that you only use 1-2 tablespoons of liquid and only use the liquid of choice for giving supplements, not for regular drinks in order to avoid confusion.

Remember that the choice of liquids or purees used should be based upon *your* child's issues which need to take into consideration any allergies, phenol sensitivities, and sensitivity to sugar. **Adding one drop of liquid stevia (Wisdom Natural brand recommended) can add additional sweetness (without feeding yeast) to further mask the taste of supplements.**

4. Use the Concept of "First – Then." This is a critical concept to ensure compliance. If your child is in an ABA program, this would be a good place to learn this concept. Otherwise, parents can reinforce this concept by repeating it in everyday life experiences. (i.e.; first we turn on the water, then we wash our hands). Even a very young child can learn this concept if it's repeated enough. Once this concept is understood, you need to consistently use it enforce compliance. Next, choose a favorite activity (eating the next meal, watching video/TV, favorite toy, blanket, etc), for the purpose of withholding it until or AFTER the child takes the supplements successfully.

For example: "Daniel, do you want to (eat breakfast)? FIRST you must take your (vitamins, medicines, or any name you want to call it that you use every time) BEFORE you can (eat breakfast). Even today, if my son decides to delay or give me trouble with taking his supplements, I turn off the TV and tell him that it stays off until the supplements are swallowed. It is important to **be firm and never waiver** on this, because it will ensure that success will come quickly.

5. Use Rewards to Associate Good with the Bad. This comes in handy when a child needs extra reinforcement. Another useful approach to further ensure compliance is to give a reward, which only comes immediately after the child successfully taking the supplements. ALWAYS give lots of praise and hugs as well as one good tasting reward that they can associate with taking yucky supplements. I have used good tasting chewable vitamin C tablets (only buffered C recommended) because more vitamin C is always good for the child, and it may taste somewhat like "candy" to them. Other options could include Juice Plus gummies, a small piece of Health Food Store (HFS) fruit leather or gummy bear, or even a very small drink of a favorite soda. Remember that it is important to not go overboard and load your child up with sugar (fruit sugar included), which can aggravate or cause yeast overgrowth.
6. Be consistent and firm. If you are firm and do not give in to the conditions you set down for your child, most children will start to comply within 2-3 days because they know that they cannot win the battle. Wait them out for as long as you need to, and when they FINALLY give in and take the supplements, quickly give them praise, the preferred activity and the small reward that is given every time they successfully take their supplements. This positive reinforcement will encourage them to be more willing next time.