

How do I know if my child is eating too much or not enough?

Key points:

- Children have extremely variable appetites due to growth spurts and other factors.
- Children can regulate their own food intake if we let them respond to their hunger and fullness.
- Hunger and fullness cues are the best guide to how much their body needs.
- Pressure to control food intake usually has the opposite effect to what's intended.
- Let children decide how much they eat.

Children's growth is highly variable which means the amount of food they need is constantly changing. This is further influenced by variations in physical activity and changes in appetite which can happen for any number of reasons. During times when children need more food, due to growth spurts or high levels of exercise, they can seem hungry all the time which no doubt is why we hear references to 'hollow legs' and 'bottomless pits'. At other times, children might seem to eat very little, or 'live on air'. Both extremes are perfectly normal for children at different times. Our reaction as parents or carers to these natural cycles of children's eating will shape their eating habits. The information below is based on the best evidence we have for establishing healthy eating behaviours in children and reducing the risk of weight issues and eating disorders.



Healthy babies and young children have perfect appetite control

Healthy babies and young children are experts at regulating their food intake. They will change the amount they eat and drink based on what their body needs. However, when parents or carers try to control the amount children eat, the child's ability to self-regulate is disrupted. Sometimes children go along with the pressure to eat more or less than they really want. Sometimes they fight against the

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pressure. Either way, trying to control the amount that children eat overrides their natural ability to respond to hunger or fullness cues.

In the long term, pressure to control food intake usually has the opposite effect to what's intended

When parents or carers try to control children's food intake, the child is likely to push back in the opposite direction. In other words, children tend to eat less when pressured to eat more, but eat more when they feel food is scarce.

The best thing we can do is let children decide how much they eat

It's often hard to know how much food children need at any given moment, so the best thing we can do as parents and caregivers is to let them decide. The more we allow them work out how much food they need, the better they will be at responding to their body's cues of hunger and fullness, which gives them a valuable tool for lifelong healthy eating.

One well-researched and widely accepted approach is The Division of Responsibility (DoR), developed by world-renowned child nutritionist, Ellyn Satter. If coercion, convincing and/or control has become the norm, it can be difficult to understand how another way of approaching feeding could help, but the DoR approach makes feeding children much easier. When parents/carers do their job with feeding, the child can do their job of eating.

Parent/Carer's Job	Child's Job
<p>Decide WHAT to serve (while considering your child's food preferences)</p> <p>Decide WHEN the family eats</p> <p>Decide WHERE the family eats (ideally at a table)</p>	<p>Decide IF they will eat (from what is served at meal or snack time)</p> <p>Decide HOW MUCH to eat (based on feelings of hunger and fullness)</p>

Source: www.ellynsatterinstitute.org

The DoR approach can be summarised as: *Parents provide, children decide.*

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Creating a supportive feeding environment

The family feeding environment that surrounds a child has an enormous influence on establishing and promoting eating behaviours that will persist throughout life. A feeding environment that supports children to recognise and respond to their hunger and fullness cues will equip them with valuable skills to help them look after their bodies. Family routines and availability of healthy food is an important foundation for developing healthy eating habits. See [‘Is my child a healthy weight?’](#) for further information about healthy family routines.

Say what? Using language to support children in responding to their hunger and fullness

What we say about food and eating influences what and how much our children eat. Think about the words that could help a child take more notice of their hunger and fullness.

Phrases that hinder	Phrases that help
<i>Instead of...</i>	<i>Try...</i>
Good work! You finished all your carrots.	What’s your tummy telling you?
Just have two more mouthfuls before you leave the table.	Make sure you eat enough to get you through to (e.g.) breakfast (or whichever meal or snack is next).
You’ve had enough of that.	Eat what your tummy needs. Eating too much can make us feel sick.
<i>Phrases like these teach children to ignore their hunger or fullness</i>	<i>Phrases like these teach children to take notice and respond to their hunger and fullness.</i>

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Phrases that hinder

Phrases that help

It's better for children to stop eating when they are full or satisfied,
than when all the food is eaten or when we say it's time to stop.

For more information and tips for establishing healthy eating behaviours, see ['Is my child a healthy weight?'](#)

Further support

If you are concerned about your child's food intake, eating behaviours, growth or nutrition-related health, contact a GP, paediatrician or Accredited Practising Dietitian who can provide a comprehensive assessment that considers your child's medical history, eating patterns including mealtime experiences, physical activity and genetic factors.

Find an Accredited Practising Dietitian with experience in infant and child growth - <https://dietitiansaustralia.org.au/find-an-apd/>