

How to make your child a good eater

Key points:

- We can't make our children eat anything but we can support them in developing healthy habits.
- **The way we feed our children is as important as what we feed them**
- Be clear on the roles of the parent or carer and child in the feeding relationship.
- Rules help create calmer mealtimes.
- Offer foods from each of the Five Food Groups every day.
- Use language that helps support healthy eating behaviours.

When babies are very young and learning to eat solids, they are very clear about their intentions to eat – or not to eat – and there is not a lot we can do about it. They will clamp their mouths shut, turn their heads away and push or throw food away. As children get older, they often have other ways of showing us whether they want to eat or not, which can make mealtimes challenging and sometimes just plain unpleasant. A few key principles can help avoid food battles and support your child in establishing healthy eating patterns.



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. (see also: [‘Is my child a healthy weight?’](#) and [‘How do I know if my child is eating too much or not enough?’](#)).

The way we feed our children is as important as *what* we feed them

Ellyn Satter’s Division of Responsibility (DoR) defines the roles of the parent or carer and child in the feeding relationship. It is introduced in: [‘How do I know if my child is eating too much or not enough?’](#). Adhering to the DoR can be difficult at first, but clearly defined roles will mean calmer mealtimes. There will still be hiccups or speed bumps but understanding the DoR can take a lot of pressure off parents and help develop competent eaters. Here are the key jobs of the parent or carer and the child:

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The parent or carer's jobs with feeding are to...

- Choose and prepare the food.
- Provide regular meals and snacks.
- Make eating times pleasant.
- Step-by-step, show your child by example how to behave at family mealtime.
- Be considerate of your child's lack of food experience without catering to likes and dislikes.
- Avoid giving your child food or drinks between meals and snacks (except for water)
- Let your child grow into the body that is right for them.

Trust your child to...

- Eat the amount they need.
- Learn to eat the food you eat.
- Grow predictably in the way that is right for them.
- Learn to behave well at mealtimes.

Create rules that make mealtimes pleasant

Mealtime rules are a key ingredient for more enjoyable mealtimes. We shouldn't control whether our children eat or not, but we can create an expectation of their behaviour. Below are some of our favourite mealtime rules. Remember: there need to be rules for parents or carers too!

Examples of rules for children:

- Explore what's on your plate (touch, smell, lick, nibble or eat)
- Positive comments about food (no grizzling...)
- Sit properly on your chair
- Eat what you want and leave the rest
- Eat enough to last you until the next meal or snack.

Examples of rules for parents/carers:

- Praise your child for specific behaviours (sitting, tasting)
- Positive comments about food (e.g. the carrot is sweet..)
- Support children in responding to their hunger and fullness (no force-feeding, coercing, bribing)

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- Ignore negative behaviour if minor (note: not eating is NOT a negative behaviour)
- Be a good role model (your child won't eat vegetables if you don't).

Which foods will give my child the nutrients they need?

When we think about our child's nutrition, it's easy to think about all the foods they don't eat. However, take a minute to list the foods they do eat, even those foods they eat occasionally. Are there any food groups missing? Children can manage remarkably well on a very limited variety of foods. However, when there are whole food groups missing, it's more likely they will be missing out on important nutrients. By offering them foods from each food group every day, you will be providing exposure to nutritious foods and increasing the likelihood of them including all the food groups.

- Fruit
- Vegetables/salad
- Grains (cereal, bread, crackers)
- Meat, chicken, fish, eggs, nuts or legumes
- Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives

A child with a small appetite is more likely to be able to meet their nutrient needs if you avoid offering non-nutritious foods and ensure they are not having too much from one particular food group.

But... they won't eat it!

You may think that offering food that your child doesn't usually eat is wasteful and will result in a battle. However, simply the process of putting it on their plate sends some important messages - including that you believe they will eat it one day and that there is no 'special' meal for them. Serve very small amounts and don't pressure them to try it. You might be surprised. Plus, they definitely won't learn to eat it if it's not on their plate.

Language to help establish healthy eating behaviours

What we say about food and eating has a big influence on the way children eat, including how willing they are to try new, or less-preferred foods. Some of the things we say may not be teaching our children what we want them to learn. Think about the words you could use to help your child/children be more curious and adventurous with new foods.

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Phrases that hinder	Phrases that help
<i>Instead of...</i>	<i>Try...</i>
Eat your vegetables and you can have dessert.	You can crunch the carrots.
Eat that for me or I will be mad.	You can see what's inside the snow peas.
If you sit quietly, I'll give you a lolly.	You can mash the potato with your fork.
You won't like that.	You can hear the capsicum snap.
<i>Phrases like these teach children to eat for reasons other than hunger (for approval or to get preferred foods)</i>	<i>Phrases like these teach children to explore the sensory aspects of food without feeling pressure to eat.</i>

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/>