



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Health and Wellness

OBSERVING RESPONSIVE FEEDING BEHAVIORS IN THE HOME

Parent/Caregiver Behavior

Environment

- Ensures that feeding environment is pleasant with few distractions
- Ensures that the child is seated comfortably, ideally facing others to allow for eye contact among family members
- Avoids screen use during mealtimes

Behavior

- Models healthy eating habits by making healthy choices
- Has conversations about food and/or encourages the child verbally during mealtimes

Preparation

- Ensures that food is healthy, tasty, and developmentally appropriate
- Offers food on a predictable schedule

Reads and Responds to Child Cues

- Encourages and observes the child's signals of hunger and satiety (i.e., fullness)
- Responds to the child's feeding needs in a prompt, emotionally supportive, and developmentally appropriate manner
- If the child refuses many foods, experiments with different food combinations, tastes, textures, and methods of encouragement
- Does not pressure the child to eat or finish the food served to them
- Avoids intrusive attempts at direct feeding (i.e., force-feeding, holding the child's head, and threatening or shaking the child)

Age Range	Parent/Caregiver Behavior	Child Behavior
Birth to 6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeds or bottle-feeds on demand • Observes/notices the child’s hunger and satiety cues • Responds to the child’s feeding cues appropriately by feeding or discontinuing feeding the baby • Prepares to feed when the baby signals hunger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signals hunger and satiety through voice, facial expressions and actions • Uses hunger cues such as: Moves hands or puts things in mouth, displays rooting reflex, makes sucking noises or motions, clenches fist over chest and tummy • Uses fullness cues such as: Moves into intermittent pattern of sucking (i.e., stopping/starting), unlatches often while breastfeeding; pace of feeding slows down significantly; eyes become heavy, becomes drowsy or falls asleep; fidgets or gets distracted easily; closes mouth or turns away when breast or bottle is offered, and extends or relaxes fingers
6 to 12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responds to the child’s feeding signals • Introduces new foods, with increased variety, texture, and tastes • Introduces a variety of fruits and vegetables, according to health care provider’s recommendations • Responds positively to the child’s attempts to self-feed (if this is a family goal) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signals hunger and satiety through voice, facial expressions, and actions • Sits with good head control • Uses hunger cues such as: Leans toward food and opens mouth; gets excited when seeing food; focuses on and follows food with eyes • Uses fullness cues such as: Spits out or pushes food away, fidgets or gets distracted easily, closes mouth when food offered, turns head away from food, plays with food • Chews and swallows semi-solid foods • Self-feeds by hand (if this is a family goal)

Age Range	Parent/Caregiver Behavior	Child Behavior
1 to 3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers three to four healthy meal choices each day • Offers two to three healthy snacks each day • Offers food that can be safely picked up, chewed, and swallowed • Responds to the child’s signals of hunger and satiety • Respects the child’s satiety cues (e.g., when child signals “all done”) • Feeds child slowly and patiently • Responds positively to the child’s attempts to self-feed. For example: Assists the child with skills of eating while allowing child to pick up foods with their fingers and self-feed • Makes the child’s meals part of family meals as much as possible • Avoids practices such as the “Clean Plate Club” or bribing children to finish a healthy food in exchange for dessert • Anticipates mealtimes and has food ready before the child is over-hungry, tired, or crying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-feeds many different foods • Uses child-safe utensils • Uses words to signal feeding requests • May establish strong preferences for certain foods • May use mealtime as a setting within which to exercise autonomy around food choices, self-feeding, etc.

References:

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