

# Raising Healthy Children: Promoting a Positive Feeding Experience<sup>1</sup>

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All parents have heard “I don’t like that!” or “I’m not hungry!” from their child at some point or another. It’s likely that your child will not like every food that is served, but that doesn’t mean mealtime can’t still be a pleasant experience for the family. Parents may think they have sole responsibility for their child’s food choices, but Ellyn Satter, a registered dietitian who specializes in feeding and eating, advises that young children also have responsibility in the eating process (Satter, 2012). Satter’s nonprofit institute serves as a primary source for parents to learn about eating and feeding their children. If feeding your child is stressful, continue reading on how to learn about the division of responsibility in feeding and how to make meal times more enjoyable for the whole family. (To learn more information about the Ellyn Satter Institute, please visit: <http://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/index.php>).

## The Division of Responsibility in Feeding

If your child refuses to eat the nutritious foods you prepared, you may feel concerned and frustrated. However, this concern and frustration may lead you to do more harm than good. Whether you use dessert as a reward for eating certain foods like vegetables or force your child to eat all of the food on his or her plate, you have taken on full responsibility for your child’s feeding. According to Satter (2012),

the responsibilities of feeding should be divided between parents and a child as described below.

### Parent Responsibilities

As a parent, you are responsible for deciding what, when, and where your young child is going to eat.

### What To Do As a Parent

As the parent, you choose and prepare age-appropriate, healthy foods. According to the USDA’s MyPlate recommendations, a healthy diet includes making half of your plate fruits and vegetables, making at least half of your grains whole grains, eating a variety of lean protein foods, and choosing fat-free or low-fat dairy options (USDA, n.d., 10 Tips). These foods should be the basis of your child’s meals and snacks because they will provide your child with the protein, vitamins, minerals, and fiber needed for good health. By including these foods on your child’s plate, there is also little room left for foods that are high in fat and have added sugars.

If you often prepare the same meals and snacks for your child, choosing new food items may spark your child’s interest in eating healthy foods. Ask your child if he or she would like to try a new fruit or snack. In the produce sections, allow your child to choose a vegetable that he or she has never seen before and talk about where it grows or how to prepare it. Whether you are tossing some blueberries

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into your child's cereal or introducing a new type of fish for dinner, choose one or two days out of the week to try a new food or a familiar food in a new way. If you want to plant a vegetable garden or just grow some herbs on the windowsill, make it a fun project for you and your child. Not only that, but search on the Internet with your child for a healthy recipe of your child's favorite food, and then prepare it together.



Figure 1. If you ask your child if he or she would like to try a new fruit or healthy snack, it could help spark your child's interest in eating healthier foods.

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Because children often warm up slowly to new foods, you may need to let your child see you eat the food or have him or her touch and taste the food between 5–20 times (Satter, 2012). Even though he or she may not want to eat the food as often as you may enjoy it (Satter, 2012), it's important to be patient and not pressure your child to eat any food, familiar or not.

### Provide Regularly Scheduled Meals

How often do children need to eat? Satter (2012) suggests planning three meals a day at set times, as well as sit-down snacks at more or less fixed times. If your child asks for foods or non-water beverages between the set meal and snack times, then Satter (2012) recommends nicely saying “no.” When you do your job by providing regular meals and snacks for your child, he or she will have enough food to keep him or her satisfied.

### Eat at the Dinner Table

Strive to have most, if not all, of your meals and snacks at the kitchen or dinner table. Although your child may want to watch TV or play a game while eating, it is best to keep your child's focus on the meal. Not only that, but meals eaten at the table allow the family to talk and interact with each other. Be sure to keep meal talk friendly and fun. Things to talk about might include: what the best part of your child's day was, something that made your child laugh that day, or ideas for fun weekend activities.

- If you could be any animal, what would you be and why?
- What was the high and low of your day?
- What do you think makes someone a good friend?
- If a genie could give you just one wish, what would it be?
- What would you like to be when you grow up?
- What sport do you think you would be good at and why?
- If you could travel anywhere for one day, where would you go?
- **Guess the Occupation:** Give clues about an occupation, and have your child guess what occupation you are describing.
- **I Spy:** One person ‘spies’ an object around the dinner table, while others guess what object it is. Take turns around the table.
- **Finish the Story:** Similar to the classic “telephone” game, this game gets everyone involved. Start a story and allow everyone around the table to take turns adding to the story.
- **Would You Rather:** Have everyone come up with a creative and fun hypothetical question. For example, “Would you rather own a pet giraffe or a hippopotamus?”

### Child Responsibilities

Ultimately, children are responsible for the amount of food they eat and whether or not they eat at all. Although this idea may be difficult for some to accept, allowing children to decide whether or not they eat will help them recognize internal signs of hunger and fullness. In order for this division of feeding responsibility to be successful, you must trust that your child will eat during meal and snack time if he or she is hungry. And, when a child chooses the amount of food to eat, he or she will eat enough for proper growth and development. This is why providing regular meals and snacks is important. If your child decides that he or she is not hungry for dinner, then he or she can be certain that a nutritious snack will be available before bedtime. Trusting

your child's instincts will prevent "food fights" at meal times and allow the whole family to enjoy the eating experience.

## The Importance of Family Meals

In addition to dividing the responsibilities of feeding, having family meals also promotes a positive feeding experience. Eating together has a positive effect on the quality of food your child eats, and family meals tend to include more fruits, vegetables, grains, and calcium-containing foods. They also have fewer soft drinks and fried foods than meals eaten away from home (Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). Besides eating healthier, pleasant meal times can strengthen communication and family bonds. Research has shown that frequent family meals that foster a positive environment are associated with lower use of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol by adolescents (Waite, 2012.) Eating together is also associated with fewer signs of depression in youth (Waite, 2012). Additionally, the chance of developing disordered eating among teenage girls is lower when they regularly participate in family meals. Overall, there are many advantages to family meals, including better nutrition, building an open and positive relationship with your child, and promoting an all-around positive environment.



Figure 2. Keeping talks friendly and fun at the dinner table encourages your children to participate in more family meals. Pleasant meal times can also strengthen communication and family bonds.

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(For more information on the importance of family meals, download the EDIS publication FCS8925 Raising Healthy Children: The Importance of Family Meals. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1195>)

## Summary

There are a number of things you can do as a parent to promote a positive feeding experience for your child, but the responsibility is not all yours. Based on work by Satter (2012), the responsibilities of feeding are divided between parents and children. As a parent, you decide what foods your child is offered, when meal and snack times are scheduled, and where they are provided. It is important to recognize that once you have done your part, your child is responsible for how much he or she chooses to eat, and whether he or she will eat what is provided or wait for the next meal or snack. Encouraging healthy, family-centered meals offers many benefits for you and your child. Always remember to be patient, supportive, and positive and avoid pressuring your child about eating. Most of all, when feeding responsibilities are divided between you and your child, pleasant experiences are more likely to be achieved.

## References

Satter, E. (2012). *How children learn to like new food*. Retrieved from <http://www.ellynsatter.com/how-children-learn-to-like-new-food-i-37.html>.

Story, M. & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2005). A perspective on family meals: Do they matter? *Nutrition Today*, 40(6), 261–266.

USDA. (n.d.). *10 Tips nutrition education series*. Retrieved from <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/healthy-eating-tips/ten-tips.html>.

Waite, M. A. (2012). Family style meals matter. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*.

## Recommended Websites

10 Tips Nutrition Education Series: Build a Healthy Meal: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/downloads/TenTips/DGTipsheet7BuildAHealthyMeal.pdf>

10 Tips Nutrition Education Series: Kid-Friendly Veggies and Fruits: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/downloads/TenTips/DGTipsheet11KidFriendlyVeggiesAndFruits.pdf>

Ellyn Satter, a Registered Dietitian Specialized in Feeding and Eating: <http://www.ellynsatter.com/>

United States Department of Agriculture- MyPlate: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>