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# Healthy Habits for Happy Families

A practical guide for parents and caregivers on how to encourage healthy eating and activity behaviours for the entire family to achieve and stay a healthy weight

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# How to encourage healthy eating and activity behaviours at home

Achieving a healthy lifestyle as a family can be influenced by our own food preferences and beliefs as well as the world around us. This practical guide has been designed to support parents and caregivers kick start healthier habits at home by managing some of the unpredictable situations in family life that can lead to eating unhealthily or being inactive.

## How does my child know how much to eat and when?

A child's early experience of eating and regulating appetite is key to maintaining a healthy weight throughout life. Pressuring a child to eat when they are not hungry can impact on their ability to regulate their own appetite. Restricting food when they are hungry can have a similar effect. Our genes can play a role in regulating appetite and food preferences but it is mostly the environment around us that influences what we choose.

Regulating our appetite is important in managing the amount of energy (from food and drink) that we consume. Overriding the body's ability to regulate appetite could lead to overeating and becoming overweight. Hunger signals are regulated by our brain and hormones in the body; this helps us decide how often we should be eating and how much our bodies need. Early childhood is a period when eating behaviours are becoming established. Young children can self-regulate the amount they eat very well but older children may need extra support.



## Did you know:

Parents and caregivers are the main influence on the feeding environment for a child. They choose what is eaten in and outside of the home, timings of meals and the availability of snacks or drinks. If parents and caregivers act as healthy role models, children are more likely to eat healthy foods.

# How can my parenting style influence my child's eating habits?

Studies suggest that a parent or caregiver with a responsive feeding style that guides the child to eat well rather than taking control at mealtimes can have a positive effect on a child's feeding. A responsive feeding style appropriately responds to a child's cues of hunger or fullness. Responsive feeding should be used in conjunction with other important factors. Try to avoid distractions during mealtimes such as the TV, keeping mealtimes to a maximum of 20-30 minutes and offering three regular meals plus two healthy snacks a day.

## How do I know if my child is eating enough?

<b>Early years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Toddlers refuse extra food when they have eaten enough. Physical signs might be turning their head to the side, pushing away the bowl/spoon/plate, clamping the mouth shut, spitting out food</li><li>• If your toddler is growing and developing normally then they are taking the right quantity of food for their own needs</li><li>• Remember the quantity of food eaten may vary day to day. It is better to look at your toddler's intake across the week rather than a single day</li></ul>
<b>Children</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If your child is feeling full they may not finish their plate of food after a meal</li><li>• Offering snacks too close to a mealtime will prevent your child feeling hungry</li><li>• If your child is asking for a snack between a meal and they can describe feelings of hunger e.g. rumbling tummy, offer a piece of fruit</li></ul> <p>Share with your family the timing of meals so they can adjust consuming snacks and drinks outside of mealtimes</p>
<b>Teenagers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Skipping meals e.g. breakfast, can lead to snacking and grazing on unhealthy snacks</li><li>• Eating when bored or stressed could cause us to overeat. Be aware of portion sizes particularly when eating outside the home, stopping when you feel full rather than aiming to finish the plate</li></ul>

## What could be the cause of my of my child's food cravings?

Cause	Examples
<b>Temptation</b>	<p>Asking for or eating a snack shortly after eating a meal</p> <p>Having packets of biscuits or crisps available in the cupboard</p>
<b>Environment</b>	<p>Sight and smells of foods can trigger our brain into thinking we are hungry when we are not e.g. popcorn at the cinema, walking down the confectionery aisle in a supermarket, buying a croissant with a coffee</p> <p>Association of eating with a time of day e.g. having biscuits after school or snacking late evening</p> <p>Only having unhealthy foods e.g. sausage rolls, cake, chocolate in the fridge or cupboard to eat</p> <p>Sedentary activities such as watching TV, reading, doing homework, sitting with a laptop or computer, playing video or computer games</p> <p>Being given large portion sizes at home or eating out</p>
<b>Friends/ family</b>	<p>Offering a child an ice-cream when they are not hungry because it is a hot day. Friends or relatives having a "treats tin" for when the family visits</p> <p>Offering pudding if finishing all of the savoury meal first</p> <p>Demanding a child to finish what is on their plate even if they are full</p> <p>Socialising or at celebrations where there are often many foods available designed to tempt the appetite. It is easy to overeat at these events without realising</p>
<b>Other</b>	<p>Children who have overweight or obesity may have lower responsiveness to "feeling full" so they are more sensitive to temptations around them</p> <p>Being too restrictive can prevent a child developing their self-control of eating so increasing the preference for "banned" foods when available</p> <p>Emotions such as being excited, stressed, angry or lonely which could lead to eating for comfort or relaxation</p>

## What are the key examples that can help me identify true hunger in my child?

### Hunger

Builds gradually after hours since the last meal or snack

Stomach may rumble or make sounds

Feeling faint

Diminishes when eating

Satisfied from eating

## How can I manage my child's temptations or cravings?



### Helpful Tips in Early Years

#### Example

Offer regular meals aiming for three balanced meals and two healthy snacks each day. A healthy snack contains no added sugar or salt and can be helpful in providing extra vitamins and minerals outside of mealtimes. For example toast fingers with spread, vegetable sticks with hummus or ½ chopped banana with plain yoghurt

Increase access to fruit and vegetables at snack and mealtimes

Act as a healthy role model, eating healthy foods with the family

Use non-food rewards e.g. praise, cuddles, star/sticker charts, going out to the park to play

Avoid keeping high sugar/fat/salt foods in reach and sight e.g. sweets, crisps and keep easy access to fruit and healthier snacks