



Raising Intuitive Eaters

A QUICK GUIDE



The Intuitive Eating Approach For Kids

Introduction

Most parents want to raise happy, healthy children. But raising kids to eat and enjoy a variety of nourishing foods, and have a positive relationship with food and their bodies can seem really challenging in today's world, thanks in part to the amount of information about feeding kids which is often conflicting and confusing. Add to this the well-intentioned (but often counter-productive) feeding practices passed down from generation to generation and it's not surprising that many parents feel overwhelmed when it comes to feeding their kids! It's easy to start worrying about whether your child is eating enough (or too much), and whether you're feeding them "the right way". Add to this, mealtime power struggles, picky eating, all-day snacking and short-order cooking and it's not difficult to see why this may be a significant source of stress and frustration for many parents. The good news is that there is a way to feed your children that helps resolve these worries - the Intuitive Eating approach. My hope is that my quick guide will help you get started.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for parents who want to raise their kids to

- have a healthier relationship with food and their bodies
- be happy and enjoy a variety of foods
- trust their bodies to tell them what, when and how much to eat



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Intuitive Eaters from Birth

Want to know something really cool? Babies are actually intuitive eaters from birth. They know when they are hungry and communicate this by crying, fussing, sucking etc. They also know when they are satisfied and show this by unlatching, turning their head, stopping to suck etc. As a toddler they tend to remain in touch with their body's natural hunger and fullness cues too. Some days they may eat a lot of food, and other days they may eat barely anything. But they (or rather their bodies) know exactly how to balance out their food intake from day to day. As they get older though, they can start to lose their ability to eat intuitively. There are many reasons for this including well-intentioned feeding practices like having to eat everything provided on a plate, using certain foods as a reward etc. The good news is that even if your child is a little older, it's possible to help your child eat intuitively again.





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Getting started

Here are 5 things you can start doing to help your child eat intuitively:

1. Focus on how first, consider what second

Focus on “how” to feed first using the Division of Responsibility (DOR) approach to feeding children by Registered Dietitian Ellyn Satter¹. This approach promotes a positive eating environment by striking a balance between parental control and complete autonomy on the part of your kids:

- ✓ *As the parent, you provide regular access to a variety of foods and decide where and when food is eaten*
- ✓ *Your children decide what and how much of the foods on offer they eat.*

What's so great about DOR?

- helps your kids stay connected to (and trust) their body's hunger and fullness cues while eating.
- builds kids' confidence in their eating skills and allows them to make choices that are consistent with their body's needs, rather than in response to external pressure or judgement.
- let's them know that food will be available at regular intervals.
- helps prevent and resolve almost any feeding struggle parents and children face.



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Putting DOR into practice

- As soon as they are developmentally able, allow your child to sit with the family and pick up (small pieces of) food whether they eat it or not.
- Let your children serve themselves at meals e.g. by serving meals family style. This teaches them that they are in full control of what and how much they eat.
- Allow your kids to eat as much or as little of any of the items offered (don't make it conditional e.g. by promising dessert only if they eat their vegetables)
- Provide meals and snacks at regular intervals throughout the day so your kids know that if they choose not to eat much at one meal or snack, more food will be offered within a couple of hours.
- Offer a variety of foods so that your kids are able to self-select and meet their nutritional needs.
- Provide some 'safe' foods you know they like and will eat. This helps keep mealtimes peaceful.
- Try offering a new or previously disliked food for them to try if they want to, or just let them see you enjoying it.
- Encourage family meals around the table with positive conversation, no devices or other distractions.



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2. More role modelling (and less talk about food)

Children are great imitators. If they see both parents eating when they are hungry, stopping when they are satisfied and enjoying a wide range of foods including fruit and vegetables, they are more likely to do so too. On the other hand, if you constantly worry about what you eat and gaining weight, this can influence your children's relationship with food and their bodies. Less talk (about food) and more role modelling will also mean your child is open to trying new foods.

3. Avoid using food as a bribe, reward or to comfort

Using food as a bribe or reward – for example, promising your child ice cream if they finish their vegetables - can be effective in the moment, but is counterproductive in the long term. Ultimately, it leads to them disliking the food they have to eat (in this case vegetables) and liking the reward food (ice cream) more. Being rewarded with food may also contribute to emotional eating and fussiness². Instead, encourage and praise your children in ways that don't involve food like quality time to do something fun with a parent.

4. Take a neutral approach to food

Although well-intentioned, restricting food or types of food, in the hope of promoting health or even labelling foods as "good" or "bad," can be counterproductive. If you restrict what your child is allowed to eat, this can lead to an increased desire to obtain and eat "forbidden" foods, resulting in excessive consumption when that food is available, eating these foods in the absence of hunger, and emotional eating^{3 4}



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Every now and then, offer foods like sweets, ice-cream, crisps etc. with other foods at snack or mealtimes. This allows your child to feel relaxed and develop a neutral attitude to all foods and reduces the chance they overeat these foods when they become available or eat them when they're not hungry.



Using words like “good”, “bad” or “junk” or even ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ when describing food can also be unhelpful. When kids hear us say “ice cream is bad for you”, they may interpret that as “ice cream is bad and so are you if you eat it”. One way of getting around this is to try describing the food e.g.:

- Instead of saying “Eat this apple, it’s good for you”,
- Try asking “Would you like some of this apple? It’s so crunchy and sweet!”

Serving dessert with dinner can also help to keep all foods on an equal playing field.

5. Allow your kids to be the experts of their own bodies.

If your child says they’ve had enough to eat but you wish they had eaten more, don’t force them to eat them to eat more. Remember you want to help them remain in touch with their body’s hunger and fullness signals. Insisting they eat more will only serve to undermine their ability to do this and ultimately disrupt their ability to self-regulate the type and amount of food they eat.



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Am I doing it “right”?

Feeding kids is challenging for many parents. Try to keep meals as relaxed as possible and don't expect to do a perfect job all the time. It's a good sign when you start to feel less anxious about meals and feeding and your children:

- enjoy meals
- behave well at the table
- happily pick and choose from the food you make available.

A final word

The theory sounds simple, but can be really challenging to put into practice – especially if you've had your own issues with food and body image or you've been told your child is over- or underweight. Don't be afraid to reach out to a dietitian experienced in paediatric nutrition with knowledge of Intuitive Eating for more help and advice if you feel you need it.

References:

¹ Satter, E. (2000). *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense*. Bull Publishing Company Boulder: Colorado.

²Jansen, P. et al. (2020). Associations of parents' use of food as reward with children's eating behaviour and BMI in a population-based cohort. *Pediatric Obesity*. Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/ijpo.12662>

³ Birch, L., Fisher, J., Davison, K. (2003) Learning to overeat: Maternal use of restrictive feeding practices promotes girls' eating in the absence of hunger *Am J Clin Nutr*; 78:215–220. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12885700/>

⁴ Farrow CV, Haycraft E, Blissett JM.(2015). Teaching our children when to eat: how parental feeding practices inform the development of emotional eating—a longitudinal experimental design. *Am J Clin Nutr*. 101(5):908-913. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25787999/>