

Help your child be THOUGHTFUL about eating

A positive relationship with eating is important

Establishing healthy and positive attitudes and behaviours towards eating and food is really important for children and can help them build positive relationships with their bodies. Children should be encouraged to eat a variety of foods for their health, wellbeing, physical development, and enjoyment. Unfortunately, public health messaging surrounding eating, food groups and children's health can be alarming and confusing. It can be challenging for parents and caregivers to know how best to support their child's health and establish balanced, consistent and sustainable eating habits early in life.

It's important that adults' attitudes, behaviours, language and messaging about food and the body don't cause a child to become preoccupied with food, eating, their weight and body size.

It's also important to teach children that:

- health and body size are determined by more than what they eat
- food nourishes and fuels their body, but it's also something to be enjoyed
- it's good to be curious about all foods
- language about food/food groups shouldn't be judgemental – foods should be morally neutral (i.e., not good or bad)
- it's good to eat at regular intervals and listen to their body cues of whether they are hungry, satisfied, or full
- eating mindfully (i.e., eating slowly and using their senses) is a great way to enjoy food.

Interesting fact:

A child's body absorbs nutrients over a one-to-two week period. This takes the pressure off each meal.

Aim for variety and balance over the entire week.

Some important notes

Restrictive eating and dieting

Don't encourage dieting or restrictive eating by children (and teenagers) striving to lose weight. Dieting can be incredibly harmful for their mental health and physical development as it's known to be a significant risk factor for developing eating disorders.

"Diet culture", driven by the weight-loss and diet industries, sends everyone strong and harmful messages that influence our behaviours and attitudes, which can damage a person's relationship with eating and their body. They also create a false connection between weight and self-worth, which can lead to negative body image and low self-esteem.

Children (and teenagers) should be encouraged to respect food and to eat regularly for nourishment, fuel and enjoyment in long-term, sustainable ways, rather than resorting to fad diets or quick fixes.

If you're concerned about your child's eating behaviours and/or physical development, talk to your GP or paediatrician (ideally one focused on health and wellbeing not just weight or BMI).

Food nutrition labels

Food labels are generally designed to increase nutrition knowledge and to encourage healthier food choices. Research suggests most primary school aged children (and even adults) find the concept of nutritional quality and making food choices very challenging and reading labels complex. Also, for children at risk of developing serious eating issues, label reading can introduce calorie/kilojoule counting, which can negatively impact their relationship with food and eating.

Instead, try describing foods by their name (i.e., a 'lolly' instead of 'sugary treats'; 'fruit and vegetables' instead of 'healthy foods') and support children to listen to their body cues and become more aware of how foods make them feel; their body, their energy, their mood. Ask your child questions like 'Is your tummy full?' If they say they are hungry but have just eaten, ask questions like 'did you have enough when you ate, are you bored or thirsty?'

Mindful and intuitive eating can help a child to develop a positive relationship with eating and food. Read <https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/> for more about this approach.

Lunchbox comparisons

Schools have their own lunchbox rules and requests, and parents/families will have their own reasons for packing them the way they do. Encourage your children to keep their eyes on their own lunchbox and not to make negative comments about the food options or choices of their peers. You can model this behaviour by using positive, non-judgemental language about food choices. Avoid “food-shaming” or suggesting that a food choice will impact a child’s body in some way (size or health).

If your child comments on the contents of other children’s lunchboxes, a simple, neutral response is best: ‘Every family is different and that’s ok’; ‘Let’s not worry about what’s in other kid’s lunchboxes – let’s keep our eyes on our own’.

If your child asks for something in their lunchbox, you prefer they didn’t have, you might say ‘No, but we could try it some other time’, instead of making a big deal about, for example, its potential health implications. If they are asking for something you are OK with, you might say ‘Sure, I can get that for you to try, but it’s important that we keep our eyes on our own lunchbox, OK’.

If you’re looking for some lunchbox inspiration, there are lots of websites, cookbooks and even Instagram pages that can help. But remember lunchboxes are not a competition. The important thing is that your child has a range of nutritious and yummy foods that they are likely to eat, support their brain and body at school, and are affordable and accessible for your family.

Children need time and space to eat their lunch, because this teaches them that eating at school is a respected activity that is important for their learning. If your child is struggling to eat theirs due to insufficient time, speak with their teacher.

If you’re worried your child may be intentionally avoiding lunch or other snacks at school, read our [Concerned About a Child](#) webpage or talk with your child’s teacher.

Tips for promoting a thoughtful relationship with eating

Try

- ✓ Speaking positively about all food groups and talking about foods by their name and sensory properties (e.g., taste, shape, colour, texture).
These neutral ways of describing food are clear for children and will help to build their understanding of food (i.e., food literacy).
- ✓ Eating regularly and encouraging your child to do the same.
- ✓ Helping your child to find balance with their eating by exploring all food groups and moving in ways that feel good.
- ✓ Reminding your child that ALL foods can be part of healthy eating and serve a purpose (i.e., nutrition, fuel, enjoyment).
- ✓ Promoting curiosity and non-judgement of ALL foods.
- ✓ Encouraging mindful eating by helping your child tune into their internal cues of hunger and fullness, and use their senses to explore, try, and enjoy food.
- ✓ Reassuring your child that it's OK to not like all foods, but to try some again as our tastes keep changing.
- ✓ Involving your child in growing and cooking food, if and where possible.
- ✓ Challenging diet culture in your home.
- ✓ Seeking support for your own eating attitudes and behaviours if you are having a hard time.
- ✓ Keeping alert: if your child is frequently making negative comments about food or eating, or you're concerned about their eating behaviours and attitudes, visit our '[Concerned About a Child](#)' page.

Avoid

- ✗ Labelling foods as 'good/bad', 'healthy/unhealthy', 'clean/toxic', 'treat' foods, including not talking about sugar as 'bad'.
- ✗ Commenting or shaming other children's (or adults') lunchboxes or food choices. Instead, encourage curiosity and respect for differences in people and food preferences.
- ✗ Using body shape and/or weight to motivate a child to eat differently (e.g., 'if you eat that you will get fat'). This can increase body shame and reinforces unhelpful body ideals and weight stigma.
- ✗ Engaging in restrictive or extreme dieting or eating practices. This does not include what is required for religious practices or diagnosed health conditions/allergies.
- ✗ Putting any child on a restrictive diet (unless for allergies and under medical supervision).
- ✗ Suggesting or stating some foods need to be compensated or earned (e.g., 'I'll need to work off this piece of cake'; 'I've not eaten much today so I can eat this').
- ✗ Using food to soothe emotions or mood.
- ✗ Using food to reward or punish behaviour.
- ✗ Promoting the message that a person's body shape, size or weight is determined by what they eat.
- ✗ Singling out children of higher weight in your home (e.g., allowing one child a piece of cake and denying the other based on their weight or size).