Responsive Feeding

How a child is offered food is just as important as the foods they are served to eat. Offering food to a child involves caregivers responding to the child's individual needs.



Consistent, responsive interactions between a child and their caregiver in early life are crucial in shaping lifelong learning, behaviour, and health. Mealtimes provide a valuable opportunity for caregivers and children to engage in supportive, health-promoting interactions.

Feeding practices versus responsive feeding practices

Feeding practices are the ways caregivers offer food to children at mealtimes. They range from responsive practices, which follow the child's cues, to non-responsive practices, which override them.

Responsive feeding practices shifts this focus and control to the child. Responsive feeding practices recognise, respond appropriately, and trust children's body cues at mealtimes. Responsive feeding practices encourage the child to eat independently and in response to their individual physiological and developmental needs, which may encourage self-regulation when eating whilst also supporting cognitive, emotional and social learning and development. Responsive feeding can be considered as a core element of nurturing and care.

Responsive feeding approach

Responsive feeding follows three steps:

1. **The child signals hunger or that they have 'had enough'** through motor actions, facial expressions, or vocalisations.
2. **The caregiver recognises the cues and responds** promptly in a manner that is emotionally supportive, in response to the signal, and developmentally appropriate, e.g. helps the child access another helping if they are still hungry.
3. **The child experiences a predictable response** to signals. This last step is important for building trusting relationships as well as supporting individual cues.

Responsive feeding may look different depending on the child's age, developmental stage and individual abilities.

The responsive feeding relationship between caregivers and children can be defined by the 'Division of responsibility'. Educators and families are responsible for the developmentally appropriate structures and routines of feeding (the 'what', 'where' and 'when' of meals served). The child is responsible for whether they will eat (or not), and how much of the meal they will eat.

Responsive feeding strategies

Several key strategies form part of a responsive feeding approach. The following strategies are how adults can support a responsive feeding approach in their service and during mealtimes.

Strategies to adopt



Create a relaxed mealtime atmosphere and recognise that children eat at different speeds.



Many children benefit from mealtime structure and clear expectations; however, some children need a flexible approach and to be able to eat outside of usual mealtimes.



Sit, be present and actively engage with children.



Place food and beverages in common serving containers and allow children to serve themselves what and how much they would like to eat.

Note that this strategy is not suitable where there are children with food allergies, unless the food served is appropriate for all children with food allergies present at that mealtime.



Use specific, individualised feedback during mealtimes that focuses on what the child is doing, not on how much or what they eat.

For example, "I noticed you were eating so well with your spoon today", rather than "Good job for eating all of your broccoli".



Help children recognise their internal hunger and 'had enough' cues, for example, when a child is too busy to eat, help the child to recognise and name internal cues.

For example, "Looks like your tummy is saying 'all done'."



Provide guided choices but let children decide what and how much of the food offered they will consume.

For example, "Let's share these so that everyone who wants some can have some".



Model feelings of 'had enough' and hunger.

For example, "I'm noticing I've had enough; I'll eat again next time I'm hungry."



Encourage rather than praise children when they try new foods or unfamiliar food. Comments should not be about the character of the child, but about the action.

Things to avoid



Do not use food as a reward for behaviour.
Avoid using foods to soothe children when they are upset.



Do not pressure children to eat.

Non-responsive feeding practices

Non-responsive feeding practices occur when caregivers ignore or misinterpret child hunger and 'had enough' cues, leading to behaviours that pressure, force or manipulate children into eating certain foods or amounts of food.

Why avoiding non-responsive feeding practices matters

Recognising non-responsive feeding behaviours/practices empowers caregivers to strengthen children's natural ability to self-regulate and trust their bodies. These practices are common and often stem from caring intentions to ensure children eat well.

By building awareness of how certain approaches may affect children's connection to their internal cues, caregivers can intentionally choose responsive strategies that honour children's autonomy and support their learning, development, and wellbeing.

Non-responsive feeding practices can have a significant negative impact on children's ability to develop awareness of their body signals and to build positive skills and attitudes for eating. At their extreme, coercive practices can send children messages that make them unsafe, such as believing that adults will not listen to them if something does not feel good.

Examples of coercive or controlling feeding practices which should be avoided:

Talking about food using moral language

EXAMPLE
'good', 'bad', 'naughty', 'cheeky'

Linking behaviour with food

EXAMPLE
"you are a good boy/girl for eating the cucumber"

Assuming you know a child's hunger or 'had enough' levels

Treat/speak to children differently based on their body composition

Use words like 'should' when referring to eating

EXAMPLE
"I should eat my fruit, I shouldn't be eating this"

Pressuring children to eat or pressuring a child to finish all the food on their plate

Using food as a reward or punishment

EXAMPLE
"you can have dessert if you finish your vegetables" or "you can only eat the muffin in your lunchbox once you have finished your sandwich"

Using food to regulate emotions, such as offering food to children to calm them when they are upset

Using food to encourage or discourage specific behaviours

EXAMPLE
"if you behave well, you can have a lollipop"

Inadvertently misleading children about the purposes, functions or outcomes of eating certain foods

EXAMPLE
"eat your crusts for curly hair", or "you'll get fat if you eat that."

Encouraging or pushing infants who are bottle-fed to finish all the formula in a bottle

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