Hunger and 'Had Enough' Cue Recognition

In Australia, many of us will say 'I'm full' at the end of a meal, which may imply that we could not fit any more food into our stomachs. Sometimes, feeling 'full' can also be uncomfortable if we have eaten too much, and it might mean we have eaten more food than our bodies need.



RECOMMENDATION STATEMENT

Use 'had enough' instead of 'full' when referring to hunger and satiety cues.

Using the term 'had enough' when speaking to young children encourages them to listen to their bodies and stop eating once they are comfortable.

Remember that the amount of food someone needs can vary; 'enough' will look different at different mealtimes and on different days.

Adults can use this same language when talking about their own eating. For example, "I've had enough, I'll eat again when I'm hungry" rather than "I'm so full." When children hear adults use this language naturally, it reinforces that listening to our bodies is how everyone eats, not just a rule for children.

Strategies to support the development of hunger and 'had enough' cue recognition are listed over page.

Role modelling to support the development of hunger and 'had enough' cue recognition

Role modelling during mealtimes can happen in a variety of ways, including adults role modelling feelings of hunger (e.g. "I'm still feeling hungry, so I am going to have a second helping"), or showing how portion relates to hunger levels (e.g. "I'll start with this much and see how my tummy feels"). This kind of positive role modelling can support children to understand and respond to their own internal hunger cues.



VIGNETTE 1

Role modelling

It is lunchtime in the Maartens household, and 1-year-old Tyrese is preparing to have reheated pasta bake from the previous night but is not yet able to serve his own portion. Tyrese's dad is also going to eat lunch, so he asks if Tyrese would like to start with a little or a lot – serving a portion based on that response. He then serves up his own lunch, stating, "I think I will start with this much today, and then see how my tummy feels."

Reflection

Young children are constantly looking to the adults in their life for guidance, and mealtimes are no different. Vocalising internal thoughts of hunger and 'had enough' cues during mealtimes can role model to children how and why adults choose to serve and eat certain types and amounts of food. This role modelling can increase children's confidence to trust their bodies when deciding if they are hungry or have 'had enough', and when serving appropriate portions for themselves.

Strategies to support the development of hunger and 'had enough' cue recognition

The following environment and practice-based strategies support a child's development of cue recognition.

Engaging with, listening to and observing children helps educators recognise hunger and 'had enough' cues.

- Children will tell you if they are hungry or have 'had enough' via verbal (e.g. 'I don't want anymore') and non-verbal (e.g. stopping eating, pushing food/spoon/bottle away, fidgeting, and turning head away) communication.

Many children benefit from mealtime structure; some need flexibility.

- Predictable mealtimes help many children recognise hunger patterns.
- Some children need to eat outside scheduled times – flexible access to simple foods (fruit, vegetables, bread) ensures genuine hunger is met.
- Watch for growth spurts, illness recovery, or stressful periods when usual patterns may shift.

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

- Encourage children when they explore or try new foods or foods that they dislike, without pressure. Encouragement rather than praise – comments should not be about the character of the child, but about the action.
- Place food and beverages in common serving containers and allow children to serve themselves what and how much they would like to eat.
- Reinforce that children are allowed to listen to their bodies, even if there is still food on the plate.
- For infants who are bottle-fed, allow them to stop a feed without finishing everything in the bottle. Never coerce an infant to finish a bottle.

Using 'had enough' language helps children recognise the signals that tell them they have had enough.

- When checking in with infants and young children during a meal, use 'had enough' language. For example: 'Would you like more food, or have you had enough?', 'Is your tummy telling you it wants a bit more, or has it had enough for now?'
- Keep language neutral and non-judgemental, focusing on body sensations rather than 'good' or 'bad' eating.
- For infants and non-speaking children, respond to 'had enough' cues (turning away, slowing down, pushing the spoon or bottle away, acting like they want to leave the meal area) and narrate, 'Looks like you've had enough', or 'Looks like you've had what you need for now.'

How the mealtime area is set up affects how well children can pay attention to their own appetite.

- This includes having age-appropriate physical equipment, such as chairs, serving tools, cutlery, etc.

This information has been sourced from the Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment.

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