



HELPING CHILDREN BE GOOD EATERS

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We want our children to be "good eaters." But what is a good eater? Children who are good eaters are able to take care of their food needs in a positive and matter-of-fact way. They are able to enjoy many foods, try others, and politely turn down still others. They are able to rely for the most part on their internal cues for regulating the amounts they eat.

But children who are good eaters behave differently from adults. Children have their own ways of behaving with eating.

Children challenge themselves to eat.

Children are naturally skeptical about new food and cautious about eating it. *New* can be a food they haven't seen before, a familiar food prepared in a different way, or *someone they don't know doing the cooking*. But life is full of new situations. Children challenge themselves to meet them. The same holds true for eating. Children will work to master new foods and new eating skills, the same as they work to master other skills.

Children learn to like new foods by having them served repeatedly, by seeing their friends eat them, and by tasting them many times and by having someone they trust eat the same food with them.

Children need moral support to do a good job with eating.

Children eat better when there are supportive adults in the eating situation, being friendly, being companionable, but *not* being managing about the child's eating. Children eat better

when the environment is pleasant, comfortable and safe for them, and when their provider or someone else they trust sits down with them to eat. Children eat better when parents are interested in the provider's food service and take advantage of opportunities to show their support.

Children need to feel in control of their eating.

Children eat better when they can pick and choose from foods that are available and decide whether—and how much—they are going to eat. They need the freedom to turn down food they don't want—or the reassurance that they can choose not to eat something they have taken. They benefit from knowing they can taste a food and decide not to finish it. When children know they have an "out" with food, they can do more and dare more than if they get the feeling they "have" to eat.

Children are erratic about their eating.

Children have built into them the ability to eat a variety. At home as well as at their provider's, they may eat a lot one day and a little the next, accept a food enthusiastically one day and turn it down the next. They also know *how much* they need to eat. Their internal sense of hunger, appetite and fullness is stronger than adults', and they eat the right amount to grow properly. They are more likely than adults to stop when they are full rather than when the food is gone.

Children waste food.

Household food consumption surveys show that plate waste goes up when there are children in the family. Adults tend to clean their plates and eat the expensive foods (like meat, vegetables, fruits and sweets). Children do not. And they often don't finish their milk. A certain amount of waste is inevitable.

Children won't eat food that is unappealing to them.

Food rejection has as much to do with the *child* as with the *foods*. Adults eat food because they like it, but they also eat food that doesn't taste the best to them because the food is good for them or because they paid for it or to keep from getting hungry later. Children don't. They eat because food *tastes* good. And they eat what hits them right *at the time*.

While attractive and well-prepared food that is generally familiar is important in allowing children to eat better, it doesn't do the whole job. Children have bigger appetites some days than others. They grow faster some times than others. Some generally-favorite foods don't taste good to them some days.

Children need limits.

Children do not benefit from being allowed to say "YUK!" at meal time. They benefit from learning to be respectful of other people's feelings—whether those are grownups' feelings about the food they have prepared or their friends' feelings about what they like.

Children benefit from learning to turn down food politely (a simple "no thank you" will do), to be matter-of-fact about choosing not to eat something, and to be subtle about getting something back out of their mouths when they don't feel like swallowing. If children are rude about food, look for ways grownups are putting pressure on their eating. Children may be fighting back.

Feeding demands a division of responsibility.

Parents and child care providers can only provide a variety of attractive, wholesome food in pleasant surroundings—and work together to encourage positive approaches to feeding. After that, it is up to the children to eat. They have their own kinky ways of going about it. Taken on a day-to-day basis, it can *look* like they aren't accepting foods at all well. But over the long term, children *will* eat, and they *will* learn to like a variety of food. Putting pressure on children to increase food acceptance or decrease food waste will backfire. Children eat *less* well, not better, when they are forced, bribed or cajoled to eat.

For more about feeding children so they can be good eaters, read:

- *Child of Mine, Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, Bull Publishing, 2002

A warm, supportive and entertaining book that tells how to parent with food and feeding in a wise, loving and tuned-in way. Satter empowers parents to make their own judgments about nutrition and feeding from infancy through preschool.

- *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, Kelcy Press, 1999

What to feed and how to feed, and how to get an enjoyable and rewarding meal on the table. Satter emphasizes, "when the joy goes out of eating, nutrition suffers." About nutrition education for children, she says: "Expose children to the possibilities, encourage them to explore and allow them to develop their capabilities with eating."

- *Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming*, Kelcy Press, 2005 Restricting children's food does more harm than good. Children become whining food sneaks, siblings become spying tattletales, parents become police officers and children get fatter, not thinner. In *Your Child's Weight*, Satter considers babies through adolescents and shares her evidence-based discoveries about what to do instead.