

ELLYN SATTER'S DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY IN FEEDING

Children develop eating competence step-by-step throughout the growing-up years when they are fed according to a stage-appropriate division of responsibility. At every stage, parents take leadership with feeding and let the child be self-directed with eating.

The division of responsibility for infants:

- The parent is responsible for *what*.
- The child is responsible for *how much* (and everything else).

Parents choose breast- or formula-feeding, help the infant be calm and organized, then feed smoothly, paying attention to information coming from the baby about timing, tempo, frequency, and amounts.

The division of responsibility for older babies making the transition to family food

- The parent is still responsible for *what*, and is *becoming* responsible for *when* and *where* the child is fed.
- The child is *still* and *always* responsible for *how much* and *whether* to eat the foods offered by the parent.

Based on *what* the child can *do*, not on how *old* s/he is, parents guide the child's transition from nipple feeding through semi-solids, then thick-and-lumpy food, to finger food at family meals.

The division of responsibility for toddlers through adolescents

- The parent is responsible for *what, when, where*.
- The child is responsible for *how much* and *whether*.

Fundamental to parents' jobs is trusting children to decide *how much* and *whether* to eat. If parents do their jobs with *feeding*, children do their jobs with *eating*:

Parents' feeding jobs:

- Choose and prepare the food
- Provide regular meals and snacks
- Make eating times pleasant
- Show children what they have to learn about food and mealtime behavior
- Be considerate of children's food inexperience without catering to likes and dislikes
- Not let children have food or beverages (except for water) between meal and snack times
- Let children grow up to get bodies that are right for them

Children's eating jobs:

- Children will eat
- They will eat the amount they need
- They will learn to eat the food their parents eat
- They will grow predictably
- They will learn to behave well at mealtime



Children Know How Much They Need to Eat

All children know how much to eat: the large child and the small child, the big eater and the small eater. All grow in the often surprising way nature intended. Your child will get hungry, eat, get filled up, and stop eating (even in the middle of a bowl of ice cream). Whether your child needs a lot or a little, she instinctively eats as much as she needs. If you follow the division of responsibility with feeding she will automatically eat the right amount of food to grow and be as active as is right for her. Provided you don't try to control her, she can even make up for her mistakes in eating. To be competent with eating and therefore to do well with her lifetime of eating amounts that are right for her and weighing what is right for her body, she needs to be allowed to preserve her sensitivity to her internal sensations of hunger, appetite, and satiety.

Children who eat and grow at the extremes make their parents so nervous that they often interfere. It backfires. In our weight-obsessed culture, parents may try to restrict a robust child with a hearty appetite because they assume that enjoying food and eating a lot means she will get fat. It doesn't, and it doesn't work. Children who don't get enough to eat - or fear they won't - become preoccupied with food and tend to overeat when they get a chance. So do children who are deprived of high-calorie "forbidden" foods. At the other extreme, parents may try to push food on a small, thin child with a small appetite, assuming she is doing poorly and thinking they should fatten her up a bit. It doesn't, and it doesn't work. Children who have food pushed on them become turned off by it and tend undereat when they get the chance.

Don't try to control the amount your child eats. It's her job to decide how much to eat, not yours. Instead:

- Maintain a division of responsibility in feeding
- Do family-friendly feeding
- Offer sit-down snacks between meals.
- Let your child grow up to get the body that is right for her.

For more about raising children who eat as much as they need and get bodies that are right for them (and for research backing up this advice), see Ellyn Satter's *Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming*, Kelcy Press, 2005. Also see www.ElynSatterInstitute.org/store to purchase books and to review comprehensive educational materials that teach stage-related feeding and solve feeding problems.

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Your Child Will Grow Up To Get the Right Body

Your child has a natural way of growing that is right for her, and she knows how much she needs to eat to grow that way. Her inborn way of growing is supported by, and in balance with, her inborn tendency to consume more or less food and her inborn tendency to be more or less active. If you maintain a division of responsibility in feeding and a division of responsibility in activity, including trusting her to do her part with eating and moving, you don't need to worry about her growing normally - it will happen.

Your child's body shape and size are mostly inherited. She will resemble you with respect to being big, small or in-between. Her height and weight are normal for her as long as she grows consistently, even if her growth plots at the extreme upper or lower ends of the growth charts - above the 97th or below the 3rd percentiles. But if her weight or height abruptly and rapidly shift up or down on her growth chart, it can indicate a problem. In that case, consult a health professional who understands feeding dynamics to rule out health, feeding, or parenting problems.

Children who are unusual in any way - in this instance, those who are especially big or small - need particularly good social skills. Rather than trying to change your child's size or shape, which will backfire, concentrate on teaching your child to cope. Help her develop good character, common sense, effective ways of responding to feelings, problem-solving skills, and the ability to get along with others.

To help your child grow in the way that is right for her:

- Feed in the best way. Follow the division of responsibility in feeding
- Limit television, and give your child opportunities to be active. Follow the division of responsibility in activity.
- Feel good about the body your child *has*, not the one you *thought* she would have.

For more about raising children who eat as much as they need and get bodies that are right for them (and for research backing up this advice), see Ellyn Satter's Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming, Kelcy Press, 2005. Also see www.ElynSatterInstitute.org/store to purchase books and to review comprehensive educational materials that teach stage-related feeding and solve feeding problems.

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How Children Become Competent Eaters

By the time your child is 8 to 15 months old, the goal is to have her sitting up to your family table and finger-feeding herself soft table food. As she becomes a toddler, preschooler, school-aged child, and adolescent, she will gradually learn to enjoy more and more of the foods you enjoy and manage the mechanics of eating in more and more grownup ways. It takes time - years in fact - but gradually your child will become a competent eater. She will enjoy a variety of food, and she will know how to learn to like new food. She will eat the right amount of food to grow in the way that nature intended. She will know how to behave at the table so others enjoy having her there.

However, your child's ways with food can fool you into thinking she is becoming anything *but* a competent eater. Often she won't eat much - a few tastes, swallows, finger-fulls, or bites. Other times, she will eat more than you can imagine. She is unlikely to eat some of everything on the table, but will eat only 1 or 2 foods. What she eats one day, she ignores another. She is unlikely to eat an unfamiliar food. Instead, she watches you eat it, looks at it, smears it, puts it in her mouth and takes it out again. She drops food, gets it all over her face, and makes her place at the table look like a disaster area.

Courage. Eat with her, and let her eat with other adults who are friendly and supportive and who enjoy a variety of food. Keep giving her opportunities to learn and don't get pushy, or it will slow down her learning rather than speed it up:

- Give her experience with a variety of food. Don't limit the menu to foods she readily accepts.
- Understand that her watching, looking, smearing and in-and-outing are her ways of getting used to new food and getting ready to eat it.
- Let her eat as little or as much as she wants, even if she only wants one or two foods.
- Show her how to behave at the table - and how not to.

For more about competent eating for adults and for children (and for research backing up this advice), see Ellyn Satter's Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family: How to Eat, How to Raise Good Eaters, How to Cook, Kelcy Press, 2008. Also see www.ElynSatterInstitute.org/store to purchase books and to review comprehensive educational materials that teach stage-related feeding and solve feeding problems.

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The Child Who Doesn't Eat Fruits and Vegetables

Some children don't eat vegetables; others don't eat fruits. Still others don't eat either! If your child turns down either - or both - you are likely to be concerned because you have learned that they are important. First of all, relax. Fruits and vegetables carry the same nutrients, so a child can be well-nourished on either. Second, back off. **Pressure** - even nice pressure such as bribes and cheerleading - doesn't help. Your child thinks, "if they have to do all that to get me to eat it, it can't be good." Third, enjoy the food yourself. It may take years, but if you maintain a division of responsibility, sooner or later your child will learn to like the foods you enjoy. Keep in mind the word is *enjoy*. If you force food down because it is good for you, your child will know that and not learn to like it.

Keep these thoughts and strategies in mind about your child's learning to enjoy vegetables and fruits (as well as other unfamiliar foods):

- Get started with family meals, if you aren't having them already. Maintain a division of responsibility in feeding.
- Observe. Your child sneaks up on new foods: He looks and helps you cook but doesn't eat, he watches you eat it but doesn't eat it, he puts it in his mouth and takes it out again.
- Interpret. Your child's sneaking-up behavior is a sign of learning to like new foods, not rejecting them.
- Persist. Most children and grownups learn to like new food after they have done the sneaking-up bit 15 or 20 times - or more! Most cooks give up on a food after three turn-downs.
- Flavor. Tone down strong tastes with salt, fat, sauces, bread crumbs, herbs, and spices.

For more about preparing vegetables in appealing ways and helping your child and yourself learn to enjoy them (and for research backing up this advice), see Ellyn Satter's Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family: How to Eat, How to Raise Good Eaters, How to Cook, Kelcy Press, 2008. Also see www.ElynSatterInstitute.org/store to purchase books and to review comprehensive educational materials that teach stage-related feeding and solve feeding problems.

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The Picky Eater

All young children are more-or-less picky about food. What they eat one day, they don't the next. They eat a lot one day, little the next. They don't eat some of everything that is on the table, but eat only one or two foods and ignore the rest. They warm up slowly to unfamiliar foods and may have to see, watch you eat, touch or taste a food (they put it in and take it out again) 15 or 20 (or even more) times before they learn to like it, then they eat it sometimes and not others. If you maintain a division of responsibility in feeding, over time, even a cautious and slow-to-warm-up child will become less erratic about eating and less skeptical of unfamiliar food.

However, your child has gone past ordinary picky eating if she gets upset when she sees unfamiliar food, only, ever, eats her few (and shrinking list of favorite foods, and worries she will be unable to eat away from home. You can't get your child to eat, but you can help her resolve her negative feelings about eating. You can reassure her she doesn't have to eat. That will allow her to develop positive attitudes about eating and behave nicely at mealtime so she can learn. After that, she will ever-so-gradually push herself along to learn to eat a greater variety of food.

Do a good job with feeding. Have regular meals and structured snacks so your child can be hungry but not starved at mealtime. Have family meals, and make those meals a pleasure and a privilege, not a chore. To keep meals positive, don't pressure her in any way to eat.

- Teach her to say "no, thank you" rather than "YUK." Have her leave the table if she behaves badly.
- Be family friendly with meals. Pair unfamiliar with familiar food, not-yet-liked with liked foods. Don't make special food for her.
- Be sure to put one or two foods on the menu that she ordinarily eats. Bread and milk would work.
- Let her pick and choose from what you put on the table, even if she eats five slices of bread and nothing else.
- Teach her to use her napkin to get food back out of her mouth when she discovers she doesn't want to swallow. (Teach yourself this trick, as well. It will make you braver about trying new food!)

Avoid feeding errors.

- Failing to have structured meals and snacks and/or letting her eat or drink (except for water) whenever she wants to between times.
- Talking about your child's food likes and dislikes.
- Limiting the menu to food your child readily accepts.
- Putting pressure in any way on her eating.

For more about helping children learn to do well with eating (and for research backing up this advice), see Ellyn Satter's Child of Mine: Feeding With Love and Good Sense, Bull Publishing, 2000. Also see www.ElynSatterInstitute.org/store to purchase books and to review comprehensive educational materials that teach stage-related feeding and solve feeding problems.

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The Child Who Eats Too Little

All children know how much they need to eat in order to grow in the way nature intended for them. Why do you think your child doesn't eat enough? Is it because he eats less than other children? Is it because he is smaller than other children? Chances are, there is no problem. Some children don't eat much, others eat a lot. Some children who eat a lot are still small and slim. Some children are just small, others are just big. As long as your child's weight follows along near the same percentile, he is growing well. On the other hand, if his weight percentiles are going down, he may be getting thinner than nature intended. If a child eats too little and grows too slowly, it is essential to take a look at feeding.

For either the small child growing consistently or the child of any size gaining too little weight, feed in the same way: maintain a division of responsibility in feeding, keep your nerve, and let him eat and grow his way. Do not get pushy with food. Include high-fat, high-calorie food, but don't try to get your child to load up on it or any other food. He will get turned off to food and eat less when he gets the chance. Instead, feed in the best way for his stage of development, keep your nerve, and let him grow his way.

- Get started with family meals, if you aren't having them already. Have the same meal for everyone.
- Have your child join in with family meals and sit-down snacks at set times.
- Don't let him have food or drinks between times, except for water. Food handouts will make him eat less, not more.
- Include high-fat food, such as butter, salad dressing, and mayonnaise, but don't push high-fat food.
- Make wise use of "forbidden foods."
- When in doubt, ask yourself, "How would I feed him if I weren't worried about his weight?"

For more about raising children who eat as much as they need and get bodies that are right for them (and for research backing up this advice), see Ellyn Satter's Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming, Kelcy Press, 2005. Also see www.ElynSatterInstitute.org/store to purchase books and to review comprehensive educational materials that teach stage-related feeding and solve feeding problems.

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The Underweight Child

Children come in all sizes - some are small, some are big, some are slender or even thin, others are sturdy or even chubby. If your child's weight is relatively low, even if it is below the 5th or 3rd percentile on the growth chart, it is likely to be normal if it follows along a particular percentile curve. But if your child's weight falters - if it drops down across growth percentiles - it is likely to indicate a problem.

What feeding errors can make your child too thin? 1) Too much interference, 2) Too little structure, 3) Both together. Instead of trying to get your child to eat more or eat more high-calorie food, feed in the best way. Get started with family meals, if you aren't having them already. Give sit-down snacks between times, but don't let him have free access to food or beverages, except for water. Parent reliably and well and let your child grow up to get the body that is right for him:

- To provide support without interfering with feeding, maintain a division of responsibility in feeding. You manage the *what, when and where* of feeding and trust your child to do the *how much and whether* of eating from what you put on the table.
- Have the same meal for everyone. Include high-fat food, such as butter, salad dressing, and mayonnaise, but don't push high-fat food.
- Don't let him have food or drinks between times, except for water. Food handouts will make him eat less, not more.
- Make wise use of "forbidden foods."

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The Child Who Eats Too Much

Children only eat too much when they are afraid of going hungry. Otherwise children eat as much as they need. Some children eat a lot, others not so much. Some *love* to eat, but that doesn't mean they eat too much. Some children are big, others are small. Some children who don't eat much are still relatively heavy. All children know how much they need to eat in order to grow in the way nature intended for them. As long as your child's weight follows close to the same percentile on the growth curve, she is growing well. On the other hand, you need to take a careful look at feeding if your child's weight percentiles are going up.

For either the big child growing consistently or the child of any size whose weight percentiles are going up, the solution is the same: maintain a division of responsibility in feeding, keep your nerve, and let her eat and grow her way. Do not hold back on food, try to control your child's portion size, restrict high-fat, high-sugar food, push low-calorie food ("eat your vegetables before you can have dessert"), or give her *the look* when she seems to eat a lot. She will get scared and *genuinely* eat too much. Don't feed her differently from other family members. It will hurt her feelings. Instead, feed in the best way for her stage of development.

- Get started with family meals, if you aren't having them already. Have your child join in with family meals and sit-down snacks at set times.
- Don't let her have food or drinks between times, except for water.
- Have the same meal for everyone. Include high-fat and low-fat food.
- Include "forbidden" foods at meals and snacks. Trying to restrict those foods will make her eat more of them in the long run.
- When in doubt, ask yourself, "how would I feed her if I weren't worried about her eating or weight?"

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The Overweight Child

If your child's BMI (body mass index) is at or above the 85th percentile, s/he may be diagnosed as being overweight. If s/he is at or above the 95th percentile, s/he may be diagnosed as being obese. Don't worry about such diagnoses. If your child's weight follows along a particular percentile, even if it plots above the 95th percentile or even higher, it is normal growth. On the other hand, if your child's weight percentiles are going up, there could be a problem. Some children carry the genes for fatness, and those genes *let* them get too fat - they don't *make* them too fat. Errors in feeding can make vulnerable children too fat. What are those errors? 1) Too much interference 2) Too little structure, 3) Both together.

Instead of trying to get your child to eat less and slim him down, support his normal pattern of development. Do an excellent job of feeding, parent reliably and well, and let your child grow up to get the body that is right for him:

- Get started with family meals, if you aren't having them already. Give sit-down snacks between times, but don't let him have free access to food or beverages, except for water.
- To provide support without interfering with feeding, maintain a division of responsibility in feeding. You manage the *what, when and where* of feeding and trust your child to do the *how much* and *whether* of eating from what you put on the table.
- Throughout your child's growing-up years, feed in a developmentally appropriate fashion.
- To provide structure without interfering with activity, maintain a division of responsibility in activity: You provide structure, safety and opportunities. Your child chooses how much and whether to move and the manner of moving.

For more about raising children who eat as much as they need and get bodies that are right for them (and for research backing up this advice), see Ellyn Satter's Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming, Kelcy Press, 2005. Also see www.ElynSatterInstitute.org/store to purchase books and to review comprehensive educational materials that teach stage-related feeding and solve feeding problems.

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Your child's weight: helping without harming

Why are you concerned about your child's weight? Is your child large? Does your child have a big appetite? Are other family members large? What do the growth charts say? Is your child growing along a certain percentile, even if it is high?

Chances are, there is no problem. Some children are just big and have big appetites. If your child's weight plots consistently on his growth chart, he is growing normally, even if he is heavier than other children. Also, most children slim down as they get older.



On the other hand, there could be a problem. If you make an issue about your child's weight, restrict her food intake and try to slim her down, she will probably eat more and be fatter than is natural for her. Her weight could be going up faster than normal.

How can you help your child to get the body that nature intended?

Do a good job with parenting and feeding, then let go of it. Maintain a division of responsibility in feeding. Parents do the *what, when and where* of feeding; children do the *how much and whether* of eating. Don't make an issue of your child's weight, and don't let others make an issue of it, either. Children who are labeled overweight feel flawed in every way—not smart, not physically capable and not worthy.

Check yourself. Are you doing a good job with feeding and parenting?

- Having regular and reliable sit-down family meals and sit-down snacks?
- Including a variety of good-tasting, wholesome food?
- Regularly including "forbidden" foods at meal and snack time so your child doesn't sneak around and overeat on them?
- Trusting your child to decide *what* and *how much* to eat from the food you provide?
- Feeling good about the child you *have*, not the one you *thought* you might have.
- Maintaining a division of responsibility with activity.

Parents provide *structure, safety and opportunities*.

Children choose *how much and whether* to move and the *manner* of moving.

- Limiting television.

Provide, don't deprive, then trust your child to grow up to be the size and shape that is right for him or her. For more help, read Ellyn Satter's *Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming*, Kelcy Press, Madison, WI 2005.



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YOUR CHILD'S WEIGHT

HELPING
WITHOUT
HARMING

BIRTH THROUGH ADOLESCENCE



ELLYN SATTER
MS RD LCSW BCD

Is your baby too big? Does she eat too much?

Why do you think your baby eats too much?

Why do you think she is too big?

What does her growth chart say?

Does her weight follow close to the same line?

Chances are, there is no problem.

- Some babies are just big, others are small.
- Babies know how much they need to eat.
- Some babies eat a lot, some not so much.
- Eating a lot doesn't mean she will be fat.
- Fat babies slim down as they get older.

Don't try to get your baby to eat less. It scares her and makes her eat more. Instead, feed in the best way. She will eat as much as she needs. She will grow up to get the body that is right for her—big or small, tall or short, slim or chubby.

Here is what to do—and not do—when you feed your big baby:

- **Feed her in the best way. Feed when she wants to eat, as much as she wants.**

Don't go by a schedule for feeding. Don't try to hold her down to a certain amount.

- **Find out what she wants when she fusses. Pick her up, talk with her, change her pants, give her something to look at.**

Don't feed her every time she fusses rather than seeing if something else is the matter.

- **Look and talk. Be easy-going while you feed. Let her rest, then eat more.**

Don't ignore her. Don't talk too much. Don't be pushy.

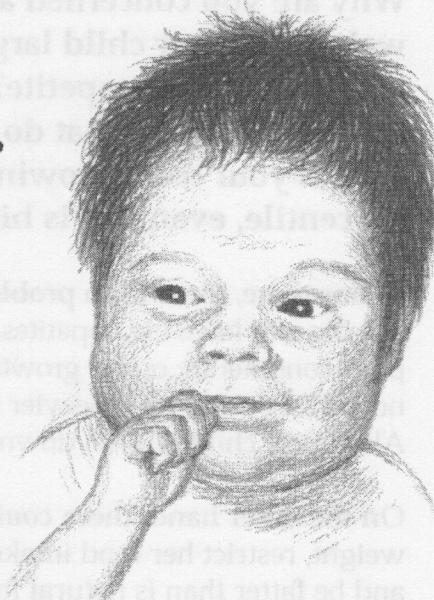
- **Let her end the feeding when she is ready.**

Don't end the feeding when she stops to rest or talk.

- **Keep your nerve; let your baby grow her way.**

Don't try to get her to be smaller or slimmer than is natural for her.

If you have trouble feeding in the best way and trusting your baby to grow well, ask for help from a dietitian or other health worker who understands feeding.



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