

WHAT IS RESPONSIVE FEEDING?

It is likely that you have considered **what** you feed your child(ren) and **how** your food choices will impact your family's health. You may have given less thought to how you feed your child(ren). These factors include mealtime routine and structure, mealtime behaviors and experiences, conversations about food, and the eating environment.

Responsive feeding is an approach to **how** to feed children of all ages and includes providing developmentally appropriate and emotionally supportive eating and mealtime opportunities.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF RESPONSIVE FEEDING?

Children are not born knowing how to eat adult foods, they must learn. Caregivers have a very important role in helping children develop food preferences, eating habits, and behaviors that build the foundation for lifelong habits. Responsive feeding practices help children learn to listen to their own hunger and fullness signals and develop eating autonomy.

Responsive feeding practices can make mealtimes easier and more positive, and support children in trying and accepting new foods.

HOW CAN FAMILIES USE RESPONSIVE FEEDING?

Practice the Division of Responsibility. The Division of Responsibility is like a line in the sand—caregivers are responsible for the **what** and **when** of feeding; children are responsible for the **how much** and **whether** of eating. Put another way, caregivers provide nutritious

foods in developmentally appropriate ways at consistent times. Children decide **how much** to eat of what is available and **whether they eat** some, all, or none of the foods in front of them.

Non-responsive feeding practices that cross this 'line' often result in overriding children's hunger and fullness signals.

NON-RESPONSIVE FEEDING PRACTICES TO AVOID:

When caregivers use non-responsive feeding practices, such as pressuring children to eat nutritious foods, children may be more likely to refuse or dislike these nutritious foods. Non-responsive feeding practices take away children's control over their own hunger and fullness signals. When children are not supported to **eat when hungry** and **stop when full**, they may learn to ignore fullness signals and overeat.

Examples of commonly used non-responsive practices include: pressuring children to eat, restricting children from eating certain foods, using food as a reward, using food as a bribe, and offering food in the absence of hunger such as to soothe a negative emotion.

RESPONSIVE FEEDING PRACTICES TO TRY:

- Provide mealtime **structure**. Offer food on a consistent schedule so that children know when they can expect food. Set clear expectations that are developmentally appropriate for your child. Remember, caregivers are responsible for **what** foods are 'on the table' for children to choose from. Provide a variety of nutritious foods such that any choice children make is OK with you.



- **Model** the behaviors you want to see. Children learn to eat by observing caregivers' eating behaviors, habits, and preferences. Set aside time and emotional energy for mealtimes so that you and your family can be present together.
- **Encourage** children to listen to their own hunger and fullness signals and to explore new foods, flavors, and textures. Trust children to know **how much** they need to eat. What caregivers think should fill a child's stomach may be much more than what children actually need to feel full. Remember—some days children may eat a lot and other days they may eat less, this is normal. Create an environment where children feel safe and empowered to explore and learn about foods and to be able to like or dislike foods without receiving a negative response.

When working on implementing responsive feeding practices, start small! Work on 1-2 things at a time to make it manageable for everyone.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ellynatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/the-division-of-responsibility-in-feeding/

“How much should I feed my baby?” [youtube.com/watch?v=CCaR8n0Qwk0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCaR8n0Qwk0)

EVIDENCE BASE (SELECTED)

Black, M. M., & Aboud, F. E. (2011). Responsive feeding is embedded in a theoretical framework of responsive parenting. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 141(3), 490–494. <https://doi.org/10.3945/jn.110.129973>

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go.illinois.edu/buildingblocks

AUTHOR INFO

Alexandra Lundquist
Ph. D. candidate, Division of Nutritional Sciences

Brent A. McBride, Ph.D.
Human Development & Family Studies

Maris Wszalek
Undergraduate Research Assistant, Kinesiology and Community Health