

Full and Hungry: Helping Children Regulate Their Own Food Intake

Tip Sheet

Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment Child Care (NAP SACC)

Healthy Child Care Project

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Best Practice: Staff should help children determine if they are still hungry before serving additional food and if they are full when they appear finished.

Rationale: “The ability to appropriately regulate appetite appears to be intrinsic from birth. However, as children develop and become socialized, problems with the control and regulation of their appetite are commonplace, as evidenced by the high prevalence of overweight and obesity in later childhood and adulthood.”ⁱ

The research shows that when the adults in children’s lives are too controlling over the foods their children are eating, children lose the ability to self-regulate. This is why stress-free meals where children are neither denied food nor forced to eat are considered best practices. Work to create a warm and pleasant mealtime where children decide if and how much they will eat.

“To assist in the formation of healthy eating habits, staff can help children learn to listen to their bodies to decide whether they are hungry, full, or eating out of habit. Children should not be forced to eat if they are full and should be given more food if they are still hungry.”ⁱⁱ Interfering with their internal hunger and satiety cues could lead to unhealthy eating patterns. The adults should also refrain from using food as a reward, as a bribe or as a means to comfort an upset child. Food in all three of these situations has nothing to do with full and hungry and creates an unhealthy dependency on food for comfort or for celebrations.

Tips and Strategies adapted from NAP SACCⁱⁱⁱ

A child’s eating behavior may vary day to day and meal to meal. Avoid waste by serving small portions to begin with. Children can always ask for seconds. If a child simply does not eat during a snack or meal, ask yourself, “How did/does he/she eat during other times of the day”? If a child is a big breakfast eater but does not eat much at lunch, there may be no need for concern. He/she may consume more of their calories early in the day.

It is normal for children not to eat everything on their plates. Remember the “division of responsibility” when feeding children. Adults decide when (time) and what (menu) children will eat. Children decide if and how much they will eat. Children may learn to overeat if they are told to finish their meal or clean their plates, which can lead to weight problems later in life.

Withholding food from a child may increase his/her desire to consume more food. Another strategy (if you are concerned about offering seconds to a child who is overweight) is to limit

offers of seconds (or thirds) to everyone to only those foods of lower caloric value such as fruits and vegetables.

Resist the urge to celebrate the “empty glass club” or to make a “happy plate” by praising children who drain their glass or eat everything on their plate. In doing so, you inadvertently teach children to override their own signals of hunger and fullness, to eat because they perceive it pleases you. This could possibly lead to overeating and weight problems later in life.

Together, we should offer children healthy foods and limit unhealthy ones. By offering only healthy foods, we are guaranteeing that the children make healthy choices in what they eat. It is the child’s job to decide if and how much to eat!

Resist the urge to use food to comfort a child who is upset, as a reward for a job well done, or to address boredom or to go overboard with junk food during the holidays. Using food in this way leads to emotional eating and interferes with a child’s ability to read and react to his/her own hungry/full cues. We carry into adulthood our childhood relationship with food. Do your best to help children develop a healthy relationship with food.

Preschool Hunger and Full Cues

According to the Gerber Foods look for these cues to suggest the child is hungry and when they are full.^{iv} Although these Gerber tips are geared for parents, they also apply to early childhood staff.

Hunger Cues

- Will express desire for specific foods with words and sounds.
- May seem tired and irritable if he gets too hungry.
- He now searches out specific foods in the kitchen that he likes.
- Comes to the meal table without a lot of fuss.
- He will be interested in eating when it is time to eat.
- A Preschooler is influenced by how you eat and the food you select.

Fullness Cues

- No longer interested in what is on the plate.
- Verbalizes in simple sentences that he has all done.
- Unwilling to come to the table if he is not hungry.
- Leaves the table on his own.

Try these additional tips from Kiyah Duffey, Ph.D.’

1. **Serve small portions.** It is important for parents to have informed and realistic expectations about their children’s food intake. Remember that kids have small stomachs. Serving the same portion size to your toddler as you do to yourself sets everyone up to experience failure at the dinner table; your child may fight eating more and you will feel like they have hardly touched their food. So, start small with portions. Allow your child to finish what’s on her plate and learn to ask for more food, or better yet let her serve herself (at least one study has shown that children consume 25% more energy when given age-

inappropriate portion sizes compared to self-served portions). This gives her a sense of independence and control and provides another opportunity for her to listen to her internal cues. Plus, it allows you to discuss all of these topics with her.

2. **Remove distractions, focus on eating.** Studies have shown that eating while distracted leads to over consumption and reduced feelings of fullness (even when more calories are consumed). So, when it is time to eat, whether it is a meal or a snack, take time to sit down and really enjoy your food. Stay present and attuned to the task at hand and use meal/snack time as another opportunity to connect with your child. All of these behaviors will help your child (and you!) develop a healthy respect for and relationship with food.
3. **Take your time.** Parents of young children have probably observed that kids tend to take longer to eat than adults (at least at younger ages), and this might actually be a good thing as it takes our body time to register those satiety signals telling us that we are full. In children, shorter attention spans (at 1 year old) have been associated with a greater chance of being overweight at age 6; slow down and take time when eating to focus on the flavors and textures ...and on enjoying the company.
4. **Trust your children.** It is important to remember that caloric needs are met over the course of a day, not at any given meal and that children's appetites will vary depending on what else they have eaten that day, how active they have been, and whether or not they are going through a period of rapid development or growth. It is difficult to keep tabs on everything your child has consumed, especially if you are not with him all day, so trust that he knows when he is through eating. Teach him the words he needs to identify and express that feeling and to tell you that he is full.
5. **Let her choose.** Set boundaries that you are comfortable with, and within those let your children make some choices for themselves about what they will eat. This does not mean, of course, unlimited access to cookies – or even fruit – but giving your kids the opportunity to make small decisions lets them practice this important skill.
6. **Model the behavior you want to see.** Children often need repeated exposure to foods before they are willing to even taste them, let alone willing to eat them. Be patient. Continue to present the food at the dinner table, each time offering it without forcing him to consume it. Then take some yourself and let your child see you enjoying it. And do not feel the need to trick your child into eating his vegetables, for example smothering the broccoli in cheese in the hopes that he forgets the green stuff is there. These efforts will only back-fire in the long run. Parental modeling and availability of fresh fruits and vegetables at home have been positively associated with fruit and vegetable consumption in children, even years later! We want to be sure that children understand how to read their hunger signs. Too often children mistake hunger for boredom or for emotional support (comfort foods).

Using Full and Hungry in the Classroom

Consider using these examples in your interactions with children. These comments help children learn to make full and hungry a part of their vocabulary.

1. Carl has finished two cups of milk and is pouring his third. Ask, “Carl, you’ve had two cups of milk, are you still hungry?” If so, you might redirect Carl to other food on his plate. You might also ask Carl if he is thirsty, and if he would like a glass of water instead. Keep in mind Carl is still in control. If he is still hungry and wants another glass of milk, you should probably let him have it.
2. Maria is pushing food around on her plate and has not really eaten much during lunch. Say, “Maria, you haven’t eaten much, are you full already?” Or “Maria, you haven’t eaten much; if you’re hungry, you should eat now while there is still time.” Just make sure not to pressure Maria to eat.
3. Bobby is reaching for his third helping of taco meat (or Bobby is asking for thirds of taco meat). Say, “Bobby it looks like you’re really hungry today. I would be happy to give you more meat, but first I would like you to try your green beans and peaches”. Or Say, “Bobby, are you sure you’re still hungry?” This will help him assess if he is eating out of hunger or habit. Again, do not appear to judge; if Bobby is hungry and there is still enough taco meat for all, let him serve himself another helping.
4. Kadijah is moving toward the trash to dump her lunch, but it appears she has not eaten much of anything today, Ask, “Kadijah, are you full already?”
5. When you are ready to dish up seconds, ask the children first if they are still hungry, even the toddlers. Resist the urge to put a second helping on everyone’s plate without their permission.
6. The children are getting a little silly and disinterested toward the end of lunch, Say, “If you have finished eating and your belly is full, you can clear your plate and cup.
7. You are sitting with the children, as they serve themselves, Ask, “When we spoon the food onto our plates, how do we decide how much to take?” Coax children to use the words full and hungry. For example, they might say, “If we are hungry, we’ll take big servings or serve seconds. If we feel full or not very hungry, we will take small servings.
8. Children are asking for seconds of a food no longer available. Say, “We’re all out of bagels but if you are still hungry, we have fruit and milk to help fill you up”.
9. In tracking what children are eating you notice, “Jenny, you had two plates of food. You must be hungry today”.
10. When children are looking for affirmation, they may say, “I ate all of my food”. A great response is “You must have been hungry today” or “You did, are you feeling full now?” Note, how you are responding to their internal cues, instead of using “good job” or “well done” as a way to reinforce or verbally reward a clean plate. We never want to make the objective a clean plate at the expense of not responding to hungry/full cues.
11. You have had a busy morning playing outdoors and the children are anxious for lunch. Say, “We had a very busy morning; it looks like that has made some of you very hungry today. When we play that hard and expend that much energy, we get really hungry”.
12. Talk to the children about how their stomach feels. Ask, “How does our stomach feel when we’re hungry?” Empty, it hurts a bit, it is flat, we get grouchy, etc. “How does our

stomach feel if we are full?” It feels full, heavy, happy, satisfied, or uncomfortable (if too full). Remind children to pay attention to their hungry or full stomach and to eat accordingly.

13. Model the use of full and hungry yourself. Say, “This chicken salad was delicious but I’m going to stop eating because I am full”. Say, “I am really hungry today, can you pass me another tortilla?”

*Unless otherwise noted, these materials are adapted from the *NAPSACC Consultant Technical Assistance Manual*. University of North Carolina. <https://gonapsacc.org/>

**For more information, there is an excellent research paper titled *Appetite Regulation in Early Childhood: The Impact of Parenting Behaviors and Child Temperament* (see footnote i)

ⁱ Faye Powell, BSc., Claire Farrow, Ph.D., Emma Haycraft, Ph.D., & Caroline Meyer, Ph.D. *Appetite regulation in early childhood: the impact of parenting behaviours and child temperament*. Loughborough Centre for Research into Eating Disorders, School of Sport, Exercise & Health Sciences, Loughborough University, UK.

<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/bitstream/2134/17055/3/Powell%20Farrow%20et%20al%20-%20Appetite%20regulation%20in%20early%20childhood.pdf>

ⁱⁱ NAP SACC Consultant Technical Assistance Manual, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Page 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ “”, Page 30. Permission was received from Go NAPSACC in October 2018 to reprint this material.

^{iv} Gerber Foods; Understanding *hunger and fullness feeding cues*.

<https://www.gerber.com/learning-center/?topic=13>

^v Kiyah Duffey, Ph.D. *How to Build Your Child's Self-Regulation at The Dining Room Table*.

<http://drdavewalsh.com/posts/163>