



The Importance of Eating Together - Family first!

BABY CARE

ARTICLE

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5 MINS

Research has shown that shared family meals—no matter the size of your family—provide benefits for your baby beyond the joy of simply eating dinner together.

Sharing family meals frequently has been shown to support a healthier diet and lower the risk of toddlers and preschoolers being overweight. Many parents find eating together is great for family bonding, and provides a relaxed, fun opportunity to teach children about healthy eating habits and good table manners. Creating a comfortable mealtime routine for your baby will help him when he is expanding the number and variety of complementary foods he is eating.

It's important that mealtimes are warm and pleasant experiences for your baby. Now is a great time to consider your feeding styles and practices to make sure you, and your family, are creating an environment that promotes and supports responsive feeding.

Dos and don'ts for simple, shared, stress-free meals

Do... make family meals a priority. Eat at a table and at the same times every day as much as possible, and encourage babysitters and other caregivers to do the same.

Don't... let your baby miss an opportunity. Even if circumstances mean he has eaten already, seat him at the table and, if he shows signs of hunger, offer him a selection of finger foods so he is still involved in mealtime. Bite-sized pieces of soft fruit or well-cooked vegetables offer another opportunity to provide nutritious foods. If he is not hungry, don't pressure him to eat. Let him sit at the table and watch the family eating healthy foods.

Do... make sure that your baby is sitting up comfortably and make mealtimes an inclusive, positive experience.

Don't... put your baby in a position where he can't see the rest of the family or their food.

Do... make sure your baby is able to see you and other family members model good eating behavior and table manners.

Don't... eat your food quickly or distractedly.

Do... choose healthy foods for your baby and for the rest of the family.

Don't... have unhealthy snacks, sugary drinks, or sweets on the table.

Do... interact with your baby and the rest of the family. Lively conversation, eye contact, and smiling between parents and little ones make the experience enjoyable for all of you.

Don't... switch on the TV or have phones or other screens at the table.

What's YOUR feeding personality?

Now that your baby has started to join in family mealtimes, it's easy to fall into patterns of feeding that might not be ideal. A parent's 'feeding personality' can be set early in their parenting journey, so it's important to think as much about *how* a baby is offered food as *what* he is offered.

Scientific studies support the practice of responsive feeding. The parent decides what healthy foods are offered and when, and the baby decides if and how much he wants to eat. In addition, the parent creates a nurturing, comfortable mealtime atmosphere for the family—positive and engaging, without any pressure to eat. Baby's hunger and fullness cues are respected.

Do you recognize yourself in these four 'feeding personality' descriptions?

Indulgent

Feeding characteristics: You don't pay attention to your baby's signs of hunger or fullness, nor do you worry about whether the meals you are offering are healthy or balanced. You, or your baby, often watch TV or use screens while feeding, and you don't interact with each other. You don't tend to limit sugary or unhealthy foods.

Expert's view: This indulgent feeding personality is not recommended. Research indicates that this type of feeding personality has been associated with lower diet quality and higher weights in children.

Restrictive

Feeding characteristics: You control how much your baby eats and are careful not to offer him too much.

Expert's view: Restricting the amount of food your baby eats is not recommended. Studies have shown that parents of larger babies may be concerned that their baby is too big and try to limit how much food he eats. Remember, for healthy growth, your baby is the one to decide how much he needs to eat.

Pressuring

Feeding characteristics: You try to increase the amount of food your baby eats, pushing him to have another spoonful, or finish his bowl, and praising after each bite. Food is sometimes used to soothe your baby, even when he's not showing you signs he's hungry.

Expert's view: This pressuring feeding personality is not recommended. Research has revealed that forcing your baby to eat more than he wants can have a negative effect on his growth, and actually result in him eating fewer types of healthy food when he's older.

Responsive

Feeding characteristics: You let your baby decide how much he wants to eat and pay attention when he seems to be telling you he's hungry. You let him tell you when he's full, then don't encourage him to keep eating if he's had enough.

Expert's view: The responsive feeding personality is recommended. Studies link this approach with healthy diet quality and healthy growth in children.

If you think you might have some of the characteristics of the first three feeding personalities, try bringing the principles of responsive feeding to your mealtimes. Practicing responsive feeding techniques encourages your baby's healthy eating habits, now, and as he continues to grow. (See [The dos and don'ts of responsive feeding](#) for more advice.)

Sources

Black MM, Aboud FE. Responsive feeding is embedded in a theoretical framework of responsive parenting. *J Nutr* 2011; 141(3): 490-4.

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