

Responsive Feeding

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Since it was published in 1983, [Ellyn Satter's Child of Mine](#) has been the leading book on feeding infants and children. Her "[division of responsibility](#)" is: Caregivers are responsible for *what* food you'll offer, and *when* and *where* your child is allowed to eat. The child is responsible for *how much and whether* to eat. Or: "[parent provides, child decides](#)." Recent trends add the idea of "responsive feeding" especially with infants and toddlers who are not yet communicating clearly.

What is Responsive Feeding

Responsive feeding emphasizes the interactive nature of feeding. Parents set guidelines (decide what, when and where food is offered), then there is a respectful give-and-take, or [serve-and-return](#), where 1) the child signals they are hungry with movement, facial expressions or sounds, 2) the caregiver provides food and engages with the child to create a warm and caring environment which encourages eating, 3) caregiver watches for signs the child is full and wraps up mealtime.

Responding to your child's cues communicates love and fosters a close relationship. You're also preserving their inborn appetite regulation by providing food when they signal they are hungry and not pushing them to eat more when they signal they are full. This lays a foundation for a lifelong habit of following cues and eating only when hungry rather than eating for emotional reasons, because they're bored, or to be in the "clean plate club." This may reduce obesity in their future.

Recognizing Hunger and Full Cues

Responsive feeding for an infant requires recognizing hunger cues (such as rooting, tongue thrusts, and sucking) and full cues (letting go, falling asleep, long pauses in sucking pattern.) I have a video you can watch to [learn about Newborn Cues](#). For an older baby, hunger cues include leaning toward food, opening their mouth, focusing on and following food with their eyes. Full cues include: spitting out food, pushing it away, closing their mouth when you offer food or turning their head away, being distracted, or playing with the food.

When your child is ~ 9 months old, teach sign language basics like the signs for "milk", "more", "hungry" and "all done." Toddlers can then communicate with those signs. Older children will learn to use spoken words to tell you when they're hungry and when they're full. Especially if these are concepts you've been talking about and cues you've been responding to since birth.

For babies and toddlers always trust hunger cues, but be aware older children do sometimes [mistakenly say they're hungry](#) when really they are bored or anxious, or say they're hungry when they really want attention or have some other needs – like wanting to delay bedtime.

A few other tips for supporting responsive eating:

- the feeding environment should be pleasant with few distractions (e.g. no TV)
- the child is seated comfortably, facing others for interaction
- foods are healthy, tasty, developmentally appropriate and offered on a predictable schedule
- don't force a child to finish the food on their plate – that usually leads to eating less
- don't use food as a reward or a punishment

- [make mealtime a joyful bonding experience](#)
- try to serve as a positive role model for healthy eating