

Want to learn more?
 Dr. Taylor Arnold, Nutrition PhD and Registered Pediatric Dietician, has a free online course on helping kids have a healthy relationship with food! [@growingintuitiveeaters](#)

Helping Kids Develop a Healthy Relationship with Food

Teaching children to have a lifelong healthy relationship with food is more important than short-term nutrition goals

What are food rules?

Food rules are rules surrounding food. They usually take 3 forms:

"You can only have 1 cookie."
 "Cake is only for special occasions."

"Clean your plate at meals."
 "Eat all your vegetables."

Rules that limit certain foods

Rules that require eating foods

"You can have ice-cream if you get an A."
 "You don't get dessert because you didn't listen."

Rules that use food in rewards or punishments

Why should you avoid food rules?



When certain foods are used as a reward, children start to associate that food with the positive feelings of success and enjoy eating it more. Since the food used as a reward is usually a treat, children who are given food rewards tend to eat more treats when they are older.



Rules that set how much is eaten teach children to ignore their hunger and fullness cues. This makes it harder for them to know how much to eat when their parents are not serving them and can lead to overeating.



When children are role modelled to use food as rewards and punishments, they tend to continue to use food to reward themselves as adults. This can mean eating more treats than they would have otherwise or feeling that they have to do something to earn their treats.



In general, forbidden and restricted things tend to become more appealing. When children can't have certain foods or have restrictions on certain foods, those foods become more appealing, and they tend to overeat those foods when they do have access to them.



Growing up with food rules leads to more preoccupation with food as an adult which can put people more at risk of developing an eating disorder.

All food is good food!

Society tends to split food into two categories: "good" and "bad." There is no morality to food! This labelling can make people feel guilty about eating "bad" foods and try to limit these foods. Limiting foods we enjoy only makes them more desirable and can lead to overeating. People who give themselves permission to eat all foods, tend to have healthier eating habits overall.

Food also serves many functions other than providing energy and nutrients that are missed with these labels.



Pleasure



New Experiences



Traditions

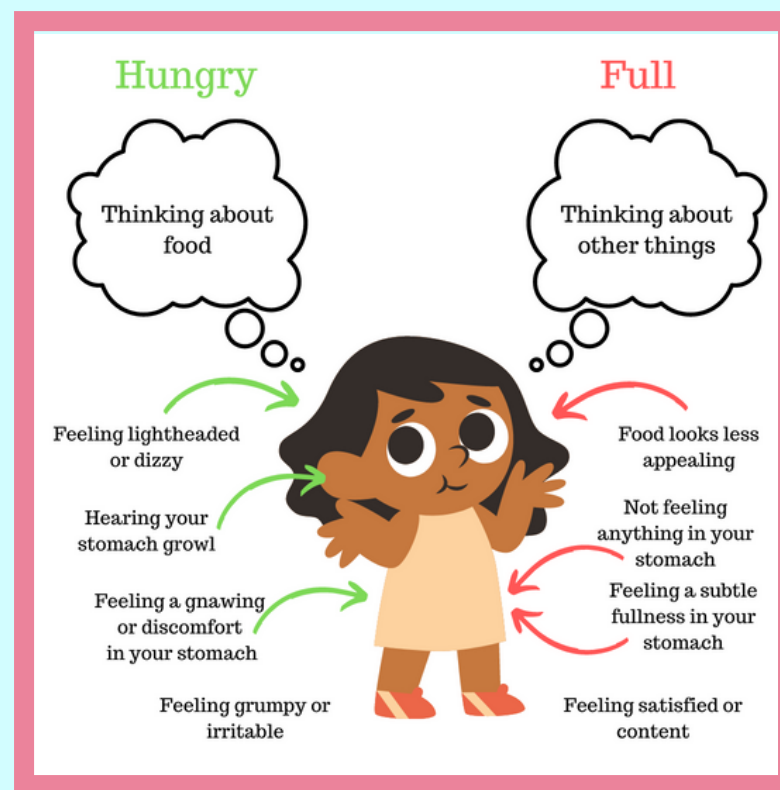


Bonding with Others

Listening to Your Body:

Eating Based on Hunger and Full Cues

Children are born with a natural ability to self-regulate their eating based on their body's hunger and fullness cues. Overtime, when people eat based on rules and recommendations from others, they become less attuned to these cues.



Tips for Parents

Teaching Comfort with All Foods

- Try to model enjoying a variety of food without labelling food as "good" and "bad."
- Talk about food based on descriptors like color, taste, and texture. Did you know children will actually eat more vegetables when talked about by how they taste rather than their nutrients?
- Have a variety of foods available for your child to eat as a snack when they are hungry.
- If your child shows a preference for foods high sugar and fat like cookies or chips, try to avoid labelling these as "unhealthy" and limiting them. Instead, help your child be curious about how their body feels after eating a range of foods. For example, they may notice that after eating a lot of cookies, their tummy hurts. Continue to offer the preferred food among other options.
- Teaching your child about nutrition is important too! Just try to do so without villainizing foods.

Teaching Children to Listen to Their Bodies

- Encourage your child to pay attention to and listen to their hunger and fullness cues.
- Try to encourage your child to stop eating when they are full, rather than asking them to clean their plate at each meal. Leftovers can be saved for a snack or another meal.
- When your child finishes a snack or meal, ask them if they are still hungry and encourage them to take more food if they are. While they are still learning, it can be helpful to remind your child of the hunger and fullness cues when you ask this question.
- Try to model that you are eating based on your hunger and fullness cues. It can be helpful to narrate this by saying that you are getting a snack or more food because you are hungry or saving the rest for later because you are full.
- Establish routines around meals and snacks. This gives your child a sense of predictability around food and increases the likelihood of your child being hungry at meals.
- Encourage your child to eat slowly and savor their food. This helps them enjoy their food more while giving their body a chance to register and let them when know they are full.

Building Food Autonomy and Other Helpful Tips

- Encourage your child to have autonomy with eating in age-appropriate ways. Get them involved in food preparation, have them help choose what is served, and allow your child to serve themselves when they are able to do so.
- Try serving meals family-style with each food on its own serving dish. This allows your child to have some autonomy in how much food they would like to eat and which foods they would like to eat.
- Try using verbal praise and special activities as rewards rather than food.
- Make meals free from distractions like TV and technology. Instead use family meals as an opportunity to connect with your children. Ask them about their daily lives and interests at the dinner table.

