

Eating for wellbeing

Note: This topic page does not provide information on feeding and weaning for babies and toddlers, although some of the information will be relevant for very young children. As it is mainly parents and carers who are responsible for what their children eat, this section is mainly for them. However, some workers may also find it relevant to their work.

Eating for wellbeing

Eating well helps children to grow and develop healthily, and is therefore an important part of flourishing. This topic page will help explain how eating well isn't just about *what* we eat - it is also about *how* we eat.

Providing a healthy, balanced diet

A balanced diet is a diet that provides the full range of essential nutrients that the body needs. A balanced diet provides energy for growth and activity, and will keep your child physically healthy. It will also help them concentrate and help them sleep well. These are all important components of flourishing.

One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.

Virginia Woolf

The Eatwell Guide was produced by the Food Standards Agency and can help you get the nutritional balance right for your child. It is suitable to use with children over 5 years and adults. It is suitable for use by healthy people of all ethnic origins and people who are of healthy weight or overweight. It is also suitable for vegetarians to use. Anyone who is underweight, under medical supervision or with special dietary needs may want to check with their GP whether it is suitable for them. For more information, see <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/the-eatwell-guide.aspx>.

Enjoying eating

Food is our fuel - we need to eat. Enjoying our food is a simple, natural pleasure in life. Encouraging children to feel good about eating is one of the simplest ways you can help them flourish and become healthy, fulfilled people.

We can use mindful techniques to help ourselves and children enjoy eating. Learning to be more mindful about how we eat can help us enjoy eating by slowing down and savouring the experience of eating.

Mindful eating can help us be more appreciative about where our food comes from and the people who have worked hard in getting it to our table. This appreciation of others and for the relative abundance of food available to us will help us feel happier.

Mindful eating can also help us learn to read our body signals more effectively about when we are really hungry and when we are full. This is important in making sure that we are eating the right amount of food for our body.

Benefits of family mealtimes

Sitting down for regular family meals can be a challenge for some families. Parents and children seem to be so busy nowadays, and may have work patterns and schedules that don't often coincide. Teenagers may prefer to eat with their friends, away from home. Or they may want to sit in front of the TV or computer while they eat.

However, eating meals together as a family has a range of benefits. It appears it may be worth making the effort to sit down and have a family meal when you can. For example, research has shown that if children eat together with the family, they are likely to eat more fruit and vegetables and drink fewer soft drinks.

A project in the US found that teenagers who ate regular family meals reported less substance use (tobacco, alcohol and marijuana), better academic success and better mental health than those teenagers eating fewer meals with the family. Teenagers eating family meals which had a positive atmosphere also reported fewer unhealthy weight control behaviours, for example, extreme dieting.

More information

Project EAT (Eating Among Teens) is a public health study in the US of the eating patterns of almost 5000 teenagers. They were asked to complete a questionnaire about their lifestyle. The young people who reported eating a greater number of family meals per week reported significantly less substance use (cigarette smoking, alcohol and marijuana use) and significantly better academic success and better mental health than those eating fewer meals with the family. You may think these kids did better purely because they were the ones who got on better with their families, but the researchers took that into account – so it was something about the actual sit-down meals which made the difference. The study also found that teenagers who ate frequent family meals which had a structured, positive atmosphere, reported fewer unhealthy weight control behaviours than teenagers without such family meals.

Eisenberg, M.E. et al (2004). Correlations between family meals and psychosocial well-being among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 158: 792-796.

Eating meals together as a family provides opportunities for sharing the day's events and for celebrating occasions together, which may help children feel more valued and appreciated.

Healthy attitudes and behaviours around food and eating

Parents are often concerned about their child's eating habits. It may be that your child just won't try new foods. This is actually very common and young children have a natural suspicion of new foods.

Or you may be concerned that your child is either not eating enough or is putting on too much weight. It is important that you help your child to read their natural body signals that tell them when they are hungry and when they are full. This will help them eat the right amount of food for their body.

Eating too much or too little is sometimes a way of dealing with negative emotions that we don't know how to express. It is important to help children express their emotions clearly in healthy ways so that they don't become dependent on food to do this.

Our eating habits as adults have an important effect on the eating habits of our children. This is partly because we have the responsibility of buying and preparing food for them. But it is also because our way of thinking about eating is likely to affect the way they think about it. If we are positive about eating and enjoy our food, our children are more likely to be this way too. On the other hand, we may be worried about eating the 'wrong' foods and focused on our body weight. Or we may use food as a way of comforting ourselves when we feel bad. We need to be aware of how our feelings and behaviours may affect the way our children respond to food.

The food that enters the mind must be watched as closely as the food that enters the body.

Pat Buchanan

How to help children eat for wellbeing

- Give children smaller portions than adults. Human beings are programmed to eat more when more is available, whether the body actually needs it or not. So if you give big portions, children may get used to big portions and may eat more than they need.
- Try to provide a variety of different coloured foods in children's meals. Children will enjoy seeing a plate full of different colours and the more variety of colours, the more nutritional the meal is likely to be.
- Encourage your children to have regular meals. From approximately one year of age, children would normally be expected to eat three meals a day and two between-meal snacks. Skipping meals is not healthy, as it could mean they are not getting the nutrients they need, and children need their energy levels to be topped up regularly throughout the day. Regular meals also provide a routine, which children respond well to. Breakfast is particularly important as it provides the energy you need to get you ready for the day ahead.
- Allow children to listen to their own body's signs of hunger and being full up. So if children say they are hungry between meals, a small healthy snack such as fruit or a slice of bread and butter may be appropriate. Also, do not force a child to eat a large amount of food if they say they aren't hungry at mealtimes. And don't force children to finish everything on their plate if they are full.
- Be a good role model. If you want your children to eat healthily, try to eat healthy food yourself.
- Try not to put pressure on children to eat specific foods. There is some evidence that if you put pressure on children to eat particular foods, you can make them less likely to want to eat them.
- If your child says they don't like a new food, keep trying to introduce the food over time. It can take up to 20 presentations of a new food before a child will try it (depending on the type of food and the individual child). So don't give up the first time they say they don't like it. Give small portions cooked in different ways, for example, you could offer steamed carrots, raw carrots, pureed carrots as a dip, carrot soup, stir-fried carrot with garlic, etc. The more a child sees and tastes a new food, the more familiar it will become. Don't pressure the child to eat more than a mouthful if they don't want to.

- Try not to forbid foods like cakes, biscuits or sweets. There is evidence that restriction of a certain food can have a short-term and long-term impact on eating this food. For example, if you tell a child they are not allowed chocolate biscuits, it is more likely that they will desire chocolate biscuits now (short-term) and when they are older (long-term), and will eat them even when they are not hungry. If you don't want a child to eat too many of these foods, don't buy them often. But, allow them to have these foods occasionally.
- Avoid classifying foods as good or bad. Foods aren't really good or bad for you - it's just that some foods should be eaten less than others, as can be seen from the eatwell plate above.
- Comfort and reward your children with attention, listening and hugs, instead of food. If children associate food with comfort and reward, then that is how they will use food when they are older. It is important to remember that although eating should be enjoyable, the main function of food is as our fuel.
- Separate eating from other activities such as watching television or using the computer. Children are likely to eat faster and less healthily when they are doing something else and are not focused on eating. Eating mindfully is important for enjoying eating and for learning how to recognise when we are full.
- Whenever possible, eat meals with your children. There are many benefits to family mealtimes.
- Suggest saying a few words to show gratitude before a meal. It could be as simple as saying "thank you" or following a more traditional grace. Or you could just create a pause before eating to set the stage for an enjoyable meal.
- Encourage everyone around the table to slow down when eating. This has a health benefit, as it will help you all to recognise when you are full. You can try this by putting your fork down between every mouthful or every second mouthful. Or, for each forkful, you could try smelling it, putting it into your mouth, noticing the taste, then the texture, then how it feels when you swallow it. [Click here for a mindfulness activity related to this.](#)
- Ask children what they think of the taste, texture and smell of the food they are eating. Remember to allow them to have their own opinion about the food – their taste-buds are different and they will have a different experience from you.
- Develop children's interest in food. Talk about what you are eating with your child – where they think the food came from, how it was grown, the nutrition it contains and different ways to prepare it.

Activities

Here are some activities you can try with children to encourage eating for wellbeing:

Pick your own



Visit a farm or 'pick your own' site with your child. This can help them understand how food is grown, picked and delivered to the shops. Picking their own fruit or vegetables can make them feel they have contributed to a meal and may make them more enthusiastic about eating it.

Grow your own



Try growing some herbs or salad vegetables. You can do this in pots if you don't have a garden. This can help children understand where food comes from and can help them get excited about food and eating.

Helping to cook



Involve your child in cooking their meal. Even the youngest child can help wash vegetables or sprinkle cheese on a pizza. Older children can make packed lunches or sandwiches. Teenagers can help decide what to eat for dinner and work with you to cook it. The more children know about how food is prepared, the more likely they are to eat it. And being involved in cooking will help to improve their sense of independence and confidence.

Dinner Time!



Make fun models of your favourite meals.

What you need:

- Paper plates
- Tissue paper in food colours (shades of green, brown, yellow, red, and orange)
- String and wool in food colours
- Cotton wool balls
- Foam packaging chips
- Corrugated card from old boxes
- Any other junk that could look like food
- PVA glue
- Thick paint brushes for the glue
- Safe containers for the brushes
- Paint
- Anti-topple water containers for paintbrushes
- Felt-tipped pens
- Safety scissors.

What you do:

- Give everyone a paper plate and ask them to use the craft supplies to make a model of their favourite dinner, without telling anyone else what they're making.
- The tissue paper can be used with the glue to help colour the model food, or it can be rolled into balls and other foodie shapes.
- When the 'dinners' have been finished, rinse the glue brushes, tidy up the craft supplies and throw away the rubbish.
- Then sit down together and see if you can guess what everyone likes for dinner.

Some things to talk about together:

- What do you like best about eating together?
- How can you make meals that everyone likes when everyone likes something different?
- What's your least favourite food?
- What's the funniest thing you've ever done when someone gave you food that you didn't like?
- What's your favourite celebration meal? A summer barbeque, Christmas dinner, Burns Night, Shrove Tuesday (Pancake Day), a picnic, a special festival meal, bonfire night, a birthday party...

Other ideas:

- Create your favourite meal out of coloured play dough or Plasticine.
- Cut pictures of food from magazines and stick them onto your paper plates to make your favourite meal.
- Make pictures or models of your favourite cakes and desserts instead of dinners.
- Make a display of your 'dinners' in the kitchen at home or in the dining area at school.