



Virginia Cooperative Extension Service

VIRGINIA TECH AND VIRGINIA STATE • VIRGINIA'S LAND GRANT UNIVERSITIES

Publication 348-121

Revised 1988

CHILDREN'S FOOD BEHAVIOR

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What do you do when a child won't eat? Everyone wants his or her child to form nourishing food habits. Advice on how to feed children sometimes suggests that every family has problems feeding children, that one solution will work for every family and every situation, that every family defines the same situation as a problem, or that parents completely direct the development of their children. Since children have input into the situation, and since times keep changing, no one answer will tell how to direct children's food habits. Parent-child interaction is a two-way street as both impact behavioral development.

Parent-child interaction is important in the development of children. Spend time interacting with the baby or young child during play or in routine tasks such as feeding, bathing, and clothing. Stimulation occurs by holding and touching, by eye contact, by talking and questioning, and by playing simple games. Parents are teaching sounds that will become words, meanings that become ideas, and feelings that become self-confidence.

INFANT FOOD BEHAVIOR

From the day of birth, the baby starts forming food habits and styles of eating. Babies pick up many cues and meanings from those around them. The way family members interact with the baby and the way they feed the baby will help influence food acceptance. Adapt infant

feeding to your family style and situation; take time to talk and play with the baby.

There are no set rules for how to feed babies. Cultural styles around the world show many different ways to do this. Researchers in the United States have come up with some rules that work most of the time.

1. RELAXED ATMOSPHERE

All babies have their own feeding styles — some are slow, some are fast; some are interested and some are uninterested. Don't expect every child to be the same or for your style to suit every child.

Don't play games to get the baby to eat. Food does not have to be stuffed into the child. The baby does not have to eat every bite. Remember, infant feeding is more than nutrition. Provide nourishment by following a nutrition plan and through the feelings you convey to the child. Be relaxed, keep calm, and give the baby a chance to learn and to develop new skills.

ADULT CUES: The baby quickly picks up verbal cues (words, laughter) and non-verbal cues (frowns, hurry, tone of voice). The baby can tell happiness and calmness as well as fear, anger, and disgust. Even if you try to say one thing, but underneath you are tired or in a hurry or upset about something, the baby can tell that things aren't right. The baby picks up intended and unintended cues. Adult feelings can be easily transferred to the baby and imitated. Crying and refusing to eat do not mean the baby is mad at you or trying to get something in particular. The baby's acting up may be because

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and September 30, 1977, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Mitchell R. Geasler, Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension Service, and Vice Provost for Extension, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia; Clinton V. Turner, Administrator, 1890 Extension Program, Virginia State University, Petersburg, Virginia.

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of the adult's feelings and not because the baby wants attention or is unhappy with the food.

BABIES' EXPRESSIONS: The baby also will be learning new food cues. As the baby progresses from pureed foods to foods with more consistency, the taste and feel of lumpy cottage cheese, slippery gelatin, or crunchy or hard foods will be new experiences. Babies will feel the different textures in their mouths with their lips, tongues, and cheeks as well as by touching with their fingers. First reactions may be surprise. The baby may appear to reject food, not want to eat, or to play with food. Give the baby time to sense the new textures of food.

Messy behavior by the baby usually is not to get the adult's attention. The baby needs time to learn how to do new things — learning how to suck from a nipple; how to eat from a spoon; how to drink from a cup; and then how to hold the cup and drink all alone. A whole new set of skills must be learned to do each of these new behaviors. Spitting out food, throwing food, spilling food, and drooling are all part of discovering new tastes and textures and using muscles in a new way. Instead of being bad, such behaviors can mean "I have learned how to do something new," or "I am testing the texture, feel, and taste of the food."

Be prepared for messy eating. Put plastic or newspaper under the highchair or be sure the floor is easy to wipe up and clean; keep a damp cloth nearby; and perhaps plan baby's bath time following a meal. If things get out of hand, remove the food until the baby is ready to eat. Do not punish or hit the baby. Many families give the baby a spoon at the meal table so the baby can copy eating behaviors of others. Many families tell how younger children learned so much more quickly when there was an older brother and sister to provide examples.

2. POSITIVE DIRECTIONS AND FEEDBACK

Recognize or praise the baby for learning new behavior by talking about the things that happen — eating a new food, holding a spoon, drinking milk from a cup. Be positive by smiling and by talking with the baby in a friendly way. Let the baby know when he is doing a good job feeding himself, but don't overdo it. Too much praise may make the child depend on recognition and rewards for accomplishments the rest of his life.

When in a hurry or busy thinking about something else, one can too easily use negative feedback by talking about the things going wrong. Saying "don't do this or that," an upset

or harsh voice, or criticism of spills and mistakes emphasize the wrong behavior. Negative feedback is tiring to both the adult and the infant. Instead of saying, "don't throw food," use positive directions such as "the food is for you; not the dog" or "keep the food in your dish."

3. POSITIVE EXAMPLE

Parental prejudices influence what foods are offered and what foods are accepted. Children just don't decide to hate liver and love sweets. They take their cues from the people around them and the total family situation. If adults don't eat vegetables, the baby will quickly learn by example what the family considers desirable food habits. The family sets examples by what they do and how they do it when eating at the table or in informal atmospheres.

4. CONSISTENCY

No matter what your style of dealing with feeding problems, be consistent so the baby is receiving the same signals from adults. If you tell the infant you will take the food away unless he is going to eat, then follow through. Don't wait until the behavior becomes more extreme or out of hand and then get extremely upset because the infant has not done as you wished.

Give a choice only when a choice is intended. Why ask, "Are you going to eat your green beans?" when you really mean taste one, eat some, or clean your plate. The better question might be "Which do you want to taste next — carrots or green beans?"

5. APPROPRIATENESS

Food is for nourishing the body. Using food as a reward or punishment is inappropriate. Find ways other than food to deal with behaviors.

Do not feed the baby to stop his crying. Crying can mean many things — hunger, wetness, sickness, cold, tired, cutting teeth, rash, or other discomforts. Take time to check out reasons for crying. Ignoring crying or over compensating with attention are both inappropriate behaviors.

Do not give the baby a bottle to keep him quiet or to fall asleep with. Milk, juice, and powdered drinks all contain sugar. The sleeping infant holds these fluids in his mouth. The result is decayed teeth. The problem is called NURSING BOTTLE SYNDROME. When it's time for bed, holding, rocking, singing, or quiet talk are ways to help the baby fall asleep.

PRESCHOOLERS' FOOD BEHAVIOR

How do children form eating habits and decide what they will eat and what they will refuse? We really don't know the answer to this question. But we do know some things about preschoolers' food habits.

Children copy family eating behavior and eat familiar foods. In most cases, the child will eat food that the family eats.

- The desserts and snacks the family eats will probably be what the child eats and likes. The child learns from the family what foods are for celebrating, what foods are nutritious, and the many uses of foods.
- Research results show that whether sweet or unsweet, food used as rewards, reinforcers, pacifiers, and treats at celebrations and special events are well-accepted by children.
- Children are not born with the ability to select nourishing foods. Although a classic study by Davis is sometimes quoted to illustrate that preschoolers can naturally select foods for health and growth, the children in this study were offered only nutritious foods. Children need to be taught food selection for health and growth.

There is no magic rule for flavor, color, and texture of food that children will eat.

- Regional specialties feature many choices — colorful and non-colorful; few or many flavors; highly seasoned or mild; and food mixtures or plain foods. As a matter of fact, some children eat one food one day and refuse it the next. Or they eat certain foods away from home that they never eat at home. Some children like sweets and some don't. Serving foods in a different way or keeping the child happy at meal time is not always the answer to increased food acceptance. Persuasion and individual attention may work sometimes, but in the long run, will not benefit either the child or the parent. Often these kinds of efforts result in games which can frustrate both young and old.

When the child appears not to be eating, always ask, is the child healthy? Are growth patterns normal? Is the child overweight or underweight? Is the child anemic? Is the child energetic or tired? Or is the child unhappy?

- Not cleaning the plate or not asking for seconds is not the sign of a feeding

problem. Sometimes parents overestimate children's food needs and judge the child's intake by what an adult might eat. Instead of worrying about the child cleaning the plate, check on the child's health and the kinds of food being eaten. Variety is the key.

Children learn faster and try new ways when they are involved in making the decision.

- To help children develop independence and responsibility, provide opportunities for selecting nourishing food, for developing kitchen skills, and for learning how to clean up spills and messes. This process teaches lifetime skills. Just satisfying the parent's wants and desires at mealtime can inhibit and frustrate the child. However, parents need to remember the old adage, "Don't give a choice if there is no choice," especially if a child's safety is involved.

Some of the feeding problems parents often ask about are what to do when the child spits out food, vomits, refuses to eat, gags, or gorges and stuffs food. Parents also ask about what to do if the child is not eating much. As long as the child is healthy and as long as the child appears to be emotionally okay, then use the following simple rules to deal with feeding problems.

1. RELAXED ATMOSPHERE

The preschool child is learning a whole new set of skills — how to carry cups and dishes, how to serve himself, and how to pass serving dishes. When the child upsets a glass of milk, holds a plate in a sloping position so all the food slides right on the floor, or breaks a plate or glass, you might be tempted to try a new form of discipline or to tell the child about being messy. But neither of those alternatives really helps.

You want the child to learn how to handle plates and glasses and to be able to eat without mess. But you also want the child to learn how to clean up spills and take responsibility, so instead of getting mad and being a slave to cleaning up after the child, show the child how to use the mop and sponge, how to decide what needs to be done, and what he can do at his age and skill level. Giving them child-sized plates or nonbreakable plates and tumblers may help. Provide adult help with sharp knives, broken glass, hot foods, or heavy pans.

Don't let spills or dirt be the cause of anxiety for you or for the child. Instead, keep cool, let the child keep cool, and give the child directions in learning how to accomplish tasks and how to deal with mistakes.

2. POSITIVE DIRECTION AND FEEDBACK

Give positive directions as children try new behaviors or make mistakes. Scolding or hollering at the child for spilling milk is negative. Instead, be positive — tell the child to get the mop or sponge. In addition, remind the child where to place the drinking glass so it does not get knocked over; how to hold the glass with two hands to keep the milk from spilling; or only pour half a glass.

Provide positive direction and feedback by teaching the child meal-time skills. Set realistic limits so the child has a chance to develop skills appropriate to the developmental skills for his age group. The brochure *PRESCHOOLERS' FOOD HANDLING SKILLS* (348-011) has many tips for helping children develop food handling skills.

3. POSITIVE EXAMPLE: ADULTS AND PEERS

Children model behavior after adults and peers. If parents eat all day long, the child will probably copy the same behavior. If family members eat only corn and peas, chances are these are the vegetables the child will accept. If adults don't drink milk, children may consider this habit babyish and as the child grows he will figure as an adult that he doesn't need milk foods. Yet all age levels need milk or milk foods.

Positive example does not mean excessive cooperation, hiding feelings and emotions, fairy tale endings, or making the child do just what the parent wants. Instead, positive example means setting an example, giving encouragement and direction with positive words and questions, and considering each other's needs and feelings. Don't be excessive with cooperation or continued attention. Do not reward with words or objects for every successful experience.

Slapping, hitting, shaming, threatening, yelling, swearing, sending the child to isolated areas for mistakes at meal-time, telling a child he is bad or stupid, or not talking to a child are examples of negative interaction. Each of these actions can hurt a child and result in low self-esteem or lack of self-confidence. However, don't disguise your feelings when you are upset. Let the child know you are upset with what happened without making the child feel bad and stupid. Be sure to distinguish between the behavior you don't like and the child you do like, despite the behavior.

4. CONSISTENCY

Be consistent in dealing with feeding behavior — not rigid and unremitting one time and uncaring another time.

Many families want to know whether to use a permissive style or an authoritarian style to cope with children's food problems. Should they spoil or spank the child? These terms have many different meanings. Whatever you label your style, check with other family members about how to deal with food behavior — expectations at the meal table, what to do with spills and messes, and what to do when things go wrong.

Family members need to talk things over and agree on how to deal with feeding problems. Figuring things out together will be best for consistent practices. The child will be less likely to get confused about what is expected and will not grow up using one parent against the other.

5. APPROPRIATENESS

Food should not be used a form of discipline. Food does not mean success or being good. Rewards are not cookies, sweets, love, or material objects such as toys and clothes. Food is not a pacifier; punishment is not depriving the child of food such as desserts or meals; love is not giving food or material objects. The use of food as punishment or reward can teach the child that problems are solved by eating.

The inappropriate use of food for rewards, for punishment, for love, or for pacifying will teach the child cues or behaviors that are difficult to change. Instead, find appropriate ways to provide love and rewards and satisfaction. Interaction between parents and children during the preschool years is important in shaping the child's future. This time is important in the child's development of independence, coping skills, handling responsibility, and ability to resolve anxieties and conflicts.

The preschool years are the time of learning meanings. What is food? What is not food? What is good and bad? What is safe and unsafe? During these years, young children also are forming ideas and feelings about themselves and about others. Food experiences in the kitchen, at the meal table, in the grocery store, in a garden, or in other food arenas provide many chances to help the child learn simple concepts about food and nutrition. At the same time the child is learning many other skills — language development, math concepts, relationships, and self-expression.