

Move Well Eat Well

How do we know when we need to eat?



There are many reasons why we eat. Being hungry is just one of them. We are all born with the ability to know when we are hungry and when we are full. Listening to and following our internal body cues can help us to decide when and how much to eat. People who use their internal signals stop eating when they experience feelings of fullness, or they no longer feel hungry.

As we get older many external factors influence our eating which can cause us to disconnect from our internal signals. Sometimes we might eat beyond the point of fullness, because the food is delicious, we are bored or upset or it's a special social occasion. Sometimes, we'll eat even though we're not especially hungry because it's a practical time to eat. These situations are all normal and we all eat this way sometimes. One of the main reasons children lose touch with their hunger and fullness cues is because adults interfere. Putting pressure on children to eat more or eat less is a common way of interfering.

Why should we help children to tune into their hunger and fullness cues?

When given the chance, children are very good at eating when they are hungry and stopping when they are full. What can make it confusing is they don't always eat in a way that looks consistent. Some days they might eat a lot and other days not so much. It is important to trust that their body knows what it needs and over time, it will all balance out. When children are given the opportunity to eat according to their hunger and fullness cues, they build:

- body autonomy
- self-esteem
- a positive relationship with food and eating.



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Hunger

Hunger is a normal sensation in which our bodies tell our brain that the stomach is empty. Feelings of hunger are triggered by a drop in blood sugar levels, emptiness of the stomach and changes in the levels of certain hormones. Signs of physical hunger vary between individuals, but may feel like:

- thinking about food or mouth watering
- feeling a 'slump' (low in energy)
- having trouble concentrating or focusing on a task
- stomach gurgling, rumbling, or growling
- irritability or moodiness
- feeling light-headed or faint
- headache or stomach pain
- feeling physically unwell
- for babies: making sucking noises, opening mouth wide and turning towards the breast/chest, fussing and crying.



Fullness

The feeling of being comfortably full is highly individual. It can broadly be described as being satisfied or content. Feelings of fullness are triggered when the brain reacts to chemicals and hormones released when we eat. These body signals indicate that we have eaten enough energy for this meal or snack. There is a delay between when we start eating and when our body signals tell us that we are satisfied. Eating slowly and checking in with our internal body cues can help us eat to the happy point of being satisfied but not uncomfortably full.

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How can I help children to tune into their hunger and fullness cues?

The best way to help children eat according to their internal body cues is to create a positive, relaxed, and social mealtime. You can do this by:

- Creating a predictable, regular eating routine at your service rather than letting children graze throughout the day.
- Ensuring there is enough time to eat.
- Creating a calm, relaxed environment without too many distractions.
- Allowing children to serve and feed themselves where age appropriate.
- Allowing children with lunchboxes to eat and enjoy the food brought from home without providing comment, even well-meaning comments like “*well done for eating all your lunch*” can lead to children ignoring their internal body cues to seek praise or avoid criticism.
- Letting children eat food that is on offer at each meal and snack time in any order they choose.
- Encouraging older children to check in with their internal body cues, for example by asking “*what does your tummy feel like, has it had enough?*”
- Respecting children when they say or show that they are hungry or full and appreciating that everybody is different. We all need different amounts of food at different times to feel satisfied.
- Feeding small babies (birth to around six months) breastmilk or infant formula according to each baby’s hunger and fullness cues rather than to a set schedule (as much as possible in the education and care setting).
- For older babies, caregivers start to become responsible for when and where the babies are fed. Babies will continue to decide whether they want to eat and how much. Educators can be guided by the patterns set by the family.

