

# Move Well Eat Well

## Positive mealtimes

Feeding children and nurturing healthy eating is a shared job. Caregivers, early childhood services and children each have a defined role in feeding and eating.

**Caregivers** decide what food and drink is sent if lunchboxes are required. For babies, caregivers also decide whether to send breast milk or infant formula.

**Early childhood services** decide when and where children eat. If food is provided by the service, they choose what is offered for meals and/or snacks apart from breast milk and infant formula.

**Babies from birth to around six months** decide when they need to feed (hunger cues) and how much.

**Older babies and small children** decide how much, in what order and whether they eat at meal and snack times.

This means that, as a service, you can take the focus off the 'what' and 'how much' children eat and focus on making mealtimes enjoyable. Creating a positive, relaxed and social mealtime can help children to build healthy eating behaviours. You can do this by:

- respecting food sent from home
- trusting babies and children know how much they need to eat
- removing any pressure around food and eating.

### Respecting food sent from home

- It is important to remember that families define 'healthy food' in different ways.
- Caregiver's food choices are influenced by many things. Family values and access to food (including the food they can afford) will influence the food they buy. The child's food preferences, age and ability (e.g. if they manage finger food or a spoon or are being spoon fed) will influence the food packed in the lunchbox.
- Respecting food brought from home helps to build trust with children and families.
- Taking food away from a child or negatively commenting on food brought from home can lead to feelings of shame or guilt. Children need to trust that their caregivers are feeding them the best way they can.

#### At mealtimes

- Let children eat and enjoy the food sent from home without providing comment

# Move Well Eat Well

## Trust babies and children know how much they need to eat (including breast milk and infant formula)

- Children are born knowing when they are hungry and when they are full.
- Children can lose touch with their hunger and fullness cues when adults interfere. Putting pressure on a child to eat more or less is a common way of interfering (this includes pressuring babies to drink more breast milk or infant formula or removing the bottle before the baby is finished feeding).
- Giving children control over what and how much they eat from the food on offer helps them to explore foods without pressure. It also helps them to trust their body.
- It can be difficult at first to trust children know how much they need. Their intake can vary from meal to meal and day to day. Placing trust in children gives them the best chance of building a life-long healthy relationship with food.

### At mealtimes

- Let children eat food on offer in any order they choose
- Let babies and children eat as much or as little as they are hungry for – this also applies to babies with breast milk or infant formula.
- Respect babies and children when they say or indicate they are hungry or full – for babies this usually means turning their head away and losing interest.
- Encourage older children to check in with their internal body cues. To check if a child has finished eating, you might ask “*what does your tummy say?*” or “*does your tummy feel like it has had enough?*”



# Move Well Eat Well

## Remove any pressure around food

- Comments about 'what' or 'how much' children are eating at mealtimes are a form of pressure. This includes well-meaning comments like *"eat your sandwich before you have your biscuits"* or *"have a few more bites before you go and play"*.
- Positive praise is also a form of pressure. This includes comments like *"good girl for eating your apple"* or *"well done for eating all your lunch"*.
- Pressure at mealtimes encourages children to eat for external reasons. Over time, they may eat in certain ways to seek praise or avoid criticism. This makes it harder for them to listen to their internal body cues.
- Pressure can also make some foods seem more appealing or like a 'reward'. This will make it harder for children to learn to enjoy eating a variety of foods on their own.
- Shifting the focus away from 'what' or 'how much' children are eating, from the food on offer, can help them to relax around food and enjoy mealtimes.

### At mealtimes:

- Avoid commenting on 'what' or 'how much' children are eating
- Praise children for their manners or behaviour, rather than for their eating. For example:
  - *"I see you tried really hard to stay sitting while we ate"*
  - *"Thank you for putting your rubbish in the bin"*
  - *"You did a great job at remembering to wash your hands"*

## How can I support families?

- If you have any concerns or issues about food sent from home, talk with caregivers directly. Avoid communicating concerns through the child.
- Support **all** families by promoting practical food ideas that support the MVEW messages:
  - Tap into water - [www.movewelleatwell.tas.gov.au/early\\_childhood\\_services/tap\\_into\\_water\\_everyday](http://www.movewelleatwell.tas.gov.au/early_childhood_services/tap_into_water_everyday)
  - Plant fruit and vegetables in your lunchbox - [http://www.movewelleatwell.tas.gov.au/early\\_childhood\\_services/plant\\_fruit\\_and\\_veg\\_in\\_your\\_lunchbox](http://www.movewelleatwell.tas.gov.au/early_childhood_services/plant_fruit_and_veg_in_your_lunchbox)
  - Limit sometimes foods - [http://www.movewelleatwell.tas.gov.au/early\\_childhood\\_services/limit\\_sometimes\\_foods](http://www.movewelleatwell.tas.gov.au/early_childhood_services/limit_sometimes_foods)