



Jennifer Dutton
Regional Extension Agent
News Release

Monitoring Mealtime Behaviors

Parents and childcare providers unknowingly mold children's eating habits by monitoring, restricting, and even pressuring children to eat. Since the 1960's the prevalence of overweight children has doubled. It is now more important than ever to identify specific environmental stimuli that decrease the ability to respond to internal satiety cues. Hopefully, these factors can be manipulated for prevention purposes. Young children are generally highly responsive to energy intake, hunger and satiety signals. However, as children age, the accuracy of energy compensation deteriorates. Feeding strategies and external cues such as portion size and rewards may lead to overeating and loss of energy regulation.

It is important to take a look at the child's mealtime surroundings. Is the environment pleasant and conducive to eating? Children are more likely to eat when the atmosphere around them is clean, quiet and calm. They will chew and digest more efficiently when they are not engaged in conversation and are not excited about other activities going on around them. Children can sit at the table and talk their way through mealtime forgetting to eat. Toys at the table can serve as a distraction to the meal. Trying to watch television decreases interest in food. While they are preoccupied with a show, they tend to gulp food down without chewing. This is because the meal is not their primary activity. Youngsters need their table, chair and eating utensils to be appropriately sized to prevent frustration in not being able to manage their needs. Planning table settings and arrangements to reflect the season, a holiday or a special activity creates interest and makes the eating experiences more pleasurable.

New experiences make children more willing to try a new food. A picnic or a tailgate party adds variety to meals. It might be a good idea to set aside one day a week as "try a new food day." Another way to introduce something new is to connect meals to learning activities. An example would be serving "b" foods as the child learns about the letter "b". They could try biscuits, breads, bananas, berries, etc. Children respond well to pretend activities. Pretending that they are visiting other cultures and trying their foods will promote better eating habits.

Young children naturally eat to fill hunger and satiety levels. As children get older their self-control is often overrode by outside influences. Since children have not developed a sense of limits, the childcare workers themselves are the ones that should be cautious of self-control. It is

important for adults to model good eating behaviors. Children notice if adults are reluctant to try new foods. “If you don’t, they won’t” is a good rule to follow.

For more information about this or other nutrition related topics please contact Regional Extension Agent, Jennifer Dutton, MS, LD, RD, at the St. Clair County Extension office by phone at (205) 338-9416 or email jld0021@aces.edu.