

## Read Your Child's Signals

**Babies and young children know when they are hungry or full.**

They have many signals for letting us know what their bodies need by using their voices, faces, and actions. Reading your child's signals means watching and listening to her, and trying to understand what her behavior means. Responding to your child's signals lets her know that:

- she can trust herself to know when she is hungry and full.
- she is a good communicator and that her needs will be met.

**Babies have their own signals.** For example, when 3-month-old Jenna is hungry, she nuzzles her mother's shirt. When 3-month-old Damon is hungry, he sucks on his fingers and makes fussy noises.

**Sometimes the same signal can have more than one meaning.** For example, 9-month-old, Ricky, pushes the spoon away when he is full. Bianca, also 9 months, pushes the spoon away when she wants to feed herself.

**Toddlers have signals, too.** When 18-month-old Thomas is hungry, he takes his mother's hand, walks her to the counter, and points to the bananas. Liza, 24 months, simply says, "Want bana!"

## What to avoid

**Forcing your child to eat.** The fact is that forcing children to eat usually leads to the child eating less. Forcing also teaches children to rely on others to tell them how much to eat and what they are feeling. This does not lead to healthy eating habits or good self-esteem.

When it comes to eating, it can be helpful to see it as you and your child each having your own jobs. Your job is to provide your child with healthy food choices and pleasant meal and snack times. It is your child's job to decide *which* of these healthy foods to eat and *how much* to eat. When you approach feeding this way, your child learns to listen to his body and make healthy food choices. It also leads to fewer power struggles between parent and child around food. (From the work of Ellyn Satter.)

**Avoid nagging or making deals with your child.** "Just two more bites, just two more bites!" "If you eat your vegetables, you will get dessert." Strategies like these don't work in the long run. Children who learn to make deals about eating quickly learn to make deals and ask for rewards for doing other things—like brushing teeth or getting their shoes on. And soon they won't do anything unless there is a reward for it!

## Do You Know a "Picky" Eater?

Picky eating is when children refuse foods often or only want the same food over and over. Many parents worry that their picky eaters are not getting enough nutrition to grow. But in most cases, they are. In fact, 50% of parents think their children are picky eaters. But 95% of healthy babies and toddlers meet all their nutrient needs.

### Some causes of picky eating

### What you can try:

Some children are sensitive to the taste or smell of food and the way it feels in their mouth—its texture.

- Offer several healthy food choices—among foods your child *does* like—at each meal.
- Gently but frequently offer new kinds of foods. *Children need to be offered a new food as many as 10-15 times before they will eat it.*
- Talk to your child's health care provider about any nutritional concerns you may have.

Some children are simply less likely to try new things based on their temperament—their individual way of approaching the world.

- Put new foods next to foods your child likes. Encourage him to touch, smell, lick, or taste the new food.
- Try offering healthy dips such as yogurt, hummus or low-fat salad dressings to encourage children to eat vegetables.

Some children can seem "picky" because they only want to eat foods they can feed themselves.

- Offer safe "finger foods" that your child can feed herself.
- Offer your child a spoon to hold while you're feeding her. This lets her feel in control.

Some children are very active. They may seem picky because they don't like sitting for long.

- Set your child's meal out before he sits down.
- Keep mealtimes short—10 minutes or so. Let your child get up when he indicates he is finished eating.
- Put healthy foods, such as a bowl of strawberries or bananas, where your child can reach them so when he gets hungry he can easily get to good foods.

Some children have medical issues that make it difficult to swallow certain foods.

- Seek an evaluation by a health care provider. Sometimes children need special help with feeding.