

Responsive Feeding — Set Your Baby Up for Healthy Growth and Development!

Even if they can't talk yet, babies have all kinds of ways to tell you when they're hungry, and when they've had enough. When your child sends signals that she's hungry or full, it's important to respond promptly — and in a way that's warm and loving.

This is called “responsive feeding,” and it's a great way to help your child get a healthy start in life. Think of it like this: you provide, your child decides.



What's so great about responsive feeding?

There are so many things! When you practice responsive feeding you can:

- Help your child develop healthy eating habits
- Lower your child's risk of becoming overweight as he gets older
- Help your child learn how to feed himself
- Make meal times easier
- Bond with your child

At first, feed your baby on demand. But as he grows older, you can start to build a routine. A regular feeding schedule makes it more likely that your child will be hungry at meal times.



Set yourself up for success.

Here's how to practice responsive feeding:

- Make sure your child is comfortable and minimize distractions
- Watch for your child's signs of hunger or fullness
- Respond to their cues promptly — for example, if your child seems full, let her stop eating
- Focus on being warm, nurturing, and affectionate during feeding time

Learn signs that your baby is hungry or full when he's breastfeeding or bottle feeding.

When your baby is *hungry*, he may:

- Move his hands to his mouth or put things in his mouth
- Root (turn his head toward anything that touches his face and open his mouth)
- Make sucking noises or motions
- Clench his fingers or fists over his chest and tummy
- Flex his arms and legs



When your baby is *full*, he may:

- Start and stop feeding often
- Unlatch often while breastfeeding
- Spit out or ignore the bottle or breast
- Slow down or fall asleep
- Fidget or get distracted easily
- Close his mouth or turn his head away when offered the breast or bottle

Why is responsive feeding important?

If you *don't* practice responsive feeding:

- You override your baby's own internal hunger and fullness cues
- Your child may develop unhealthy eating habits and be more likely to become overweight or obese later on
- You may affect your baby's ability to “self-regulate,” or control, his eating and emotions

Here's what responsive feeding is *not*:

- You control the feeding experience, like encouraging your baby to finish a bottle even after he's pushed it away several times
- You're unsupportive, uninvolved, or distracted — like using your phone or watching TV during feeding time

Feeding a baby takes patience, and it's normal to feel frustrated at times. But try to remember that it's important to create a positive feeding experience. Ignoring your baby's hunger and fullness cues or making meal time stressful can lead to unhealthy habits.

Does crying mean my baby's hungry?

Babies cry for many reasons, and hunger is one of them. Over time, you may notice that your baby has a particular “hunger cry.” But keep in mind that crying is usually a later cue — a baby who's crying because she's hungry probably showed other signs first.

Learn signs that your baby is hungry or full when she's eating solid foods.

When your baby is *hungry*, she may:

- Lean toward food and open her mouth
- Get excited when she sees food
- Focus on and follow food with her eyes



When your baby is *full*, she may:

- Spit out or push food away
- Fidget or get distracted easily
- Close her mouth when you offer food
- Turn her head away from food
- Play with her food



Remember, with responsive feeding: you provide, your child decides. This sets your baby up for healthy growth and development.

For more information, visit www.healthychildren.org/growinghealthy.

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