

Move Well Eat Well

Social 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 a meal and snack.

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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:

- encouraging positive conversations
- role modelling your enjoyment of food and eating
- teaching appropriate mealtime behaviours.

At mealtimes:

- Don’t feel pressured to talk about food or eating, simply encourage pleasant conversation. This will help children to build social skills and can help make mealtimes a time to connect with each other.
- If you are going to talk about food, phrase questions positively. For example, try asking “what did you like about your meal today?” instead of “did you like it or not?”.

Encouraging positive conversations

- Encourage children to be polite around food. Actively discourage negative or potentially hurtful comments about what any individual is eating.
- Use neutral language when talking about food. Call food by its name, rather than referring to it as healthy, unhealthy, good or bad.
- Help children to get curious about food. Try asking them to:
 - Use the five senses to describe food (how does it look, feel, taste or smell?)
 - Explore foods (how/where does it grow? What are other ways you can prepare it?)

Role modelling your enjoyment of food and eating

- If you can, sit and eat with children. Showing children that we enjoy eating a variety of food and feel good about eating can be more powerful than anything we say.
- If you can’t sit with children to eat, role model in other ways. Try:
 - actively sharing your positive food experiences. For example, you might like to talk about a tasty meal you cooked on the weekend or about visiting the farmers market to buy vegetables. This normalises enjoying a range of foods in different ways.
 - drinking water throughout the day. This will reinforce that water is the drink of choice.

Teaching appropriate mealtime behaviours

- Manners, social etiquette and personal hygiene are all important skills that children need to become healthy eaters.