

# Smart Start: Guiding Your Child to a Lifetime of Healthy Eating

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Dr. Sheryl Hughes shares her research on common feeding styles among parents of young children and reveals which is the most successful in helping children eat healthy.

Most parents work hard to prepare nutritious, well-balanced meals for their children. But, once the children sit down to eat, what can parents do to help them learn how to eat healthy? What can parents say and do to encourage children to try new foods and to prevent them from overeating?

In our research, we have identified three common feeding styles among parents of young children. By observing families, we have found which of these styles is the most successful in helping children eat healthy.

## **Overcontrolling Style**

Overcontrolling parents want to make sure that their children eat enough or eat the right kind of foods. They do this by trying to control exactly what and how much their children eat. For example, an overcontrolling parent may tell the child to “clean his plate” or may use food as a punishment or a reward. A parent may tell the child, “You can’t have dessert until you’ve eaten all of your vegetables.” The problem with this approach is that children decide how much to eat based not on how hungry they are, but on what their parents tell them to do. These children are at risk for obesity because they begin to ignore their internal cues of fullness.

## **Indulgent Style**

Indulgent parents want to keep their children happy and make sure that they have enough to eat. They usually allow their children to eat whatever they want and as much as they want. For example, indulgent parents may prepare a special meal for a child who does not want to eat what the rest of the family is having, or may allow their children to eat as much candy and chips as they desire. These parents may use food to comfort their children when they are upset. This feeding style increases children’s risk for obesity. Children who eat large portions of energy dense foods usually consume too many calories for their level of activity and therefore can gain too much weight.

## **Responsive Style**

Responsive parents provide their children with healthy choices, but allow them to decide how much they want to eat, or if they want to eat anything at all. These parents encourage their children to pay attention to their internal feelings of fullness—a child who is sensitive to fullness cues is less likely to overeat. Parents who use the responsive feeding style have more success in encouraging their children to try new foods. Research shows that children may need to try a new food between 10 and 15 times before they develop a preference for the food—especially if it is bitter, sour, or has an unfamiliar appearance, smell, or texture.

### **TIPS: Helping Your Child Try New Foods**

Follow these tips to encourage your child to develop a preference for healthy new foods.

- Create a routine and have your child try a new food at the beginning of the meal.
- Try the food yourself and show your child how you enjoy it.
- Encourage your child to try the new food—smelling, licking, or nibbling counts the first few times a food is served.
- Ask your child what he or she thinks about the food and acknowledge his or her feelings about it.
- Praise your child for trying the new food and say that he or she can try it again sometime.

**Watch the SMART START video!** See how these feeding styles work — or don't work — in common situations in the home.

It may take some time before you feel comfortable with the responsive feeding described on this Web site and in the video. But, with some practice, the payoff will be positive—for your child and for your whole family. As children grow and develop, they will learn to pay attention to their fullness cues and to reach for healthy choices—adding up to a lifetime of healthy eating!

#### **Author:**

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