

Responsive and Non-Responsive Feeding

Responsive Feeding

What is it?

Responsive feeding is a key feature of responsive caregiving, involving a serve and return, or back and forth interaction between child and caregiver. The steps of responsive feeding are as follows:

- The child signals hunger and fullness through body movements, facial expressions, or making sounds.
- The caregiver recognizes the cues and responds promptly in a way that is emotionally supportive, based on the signal s/he observed, and developmentally appropriate.
- The child learns that caregivers will respond in a specific way, based on the different cues the child gives.

Responsive feeding also means that the child and caregiver have different roles during meals and snacks.

- The caregiver role includes
 - recognizing and attending to the child's signals of hunger and fullness.
 - responding to the child in a prompt, emotionally supportive and appropriate manner.
 - ensuring that the feeding environment is relaxed and pleasant.
 - serving developmentally-appropriate foods that are healthy and tasty.
 - offering food on a predictable schedule at times when the child is likely to be hungry. for infants, timing will be more individualized, and for toddlers, more structured to enable group meals.
- The child decides
 - whether to eat.
 - which foods to eat.
 - how much to eat.

Why is it important?

- Responsive feeding gives children the opportunity to notice, understand, and trust their bodies' cues. This helps to build the skills they need to self-regulate food intake and has been shown to prevent obesity.
- A responsive feeding approach gives children the opportunity to learn how to
 - listen to their body's signals of hunger and fullness.
 - develop self-control regarding how much food they will eat.
 - build feeding skills such as picking up foods or using utensils.
 - actively participate in meal and snack times.
 - effectively communicate their needs and learn that these needs will be met.

Non-Responsive feeding

What is it?

Nonresponsive feeding occurs when the caregiver does not accurately read and appropriately respond to the child's feeding cues of hunger, fullness, or food preference. There is a lack of positive back and forth interactions between the caregiver and the child. This can happen in the following ways.

- The caregiver controls the pace of feeding and/or prohibits self-feeding. This may be because of competing demands for time and resources causing the caregiver to complete the feeding task as quickly as possible.
- The caregiver pressures the child to eat, or overly encourages finishing a bottle, potentially overriding the child's internal hunger and fullness cues. An example of this might be if a provider coaxes a child to eat or drink, thinking he or she has not eaten enough, or the right foods or amounts. This may interfere with the child's emerging independence and learning feeding skills.
- The child controls the situation leading to indulgence. An example of indulgence would be if a child refuses to eat a meal, throws a tantrum, and a caregiver responds by giving them something else to eat. Indulgence may be more likely to happen in the child's home rather than in a childcare program that has a fixed menu consisting of only healthy food.
- The caregiver ignores the child and becomes uninvolved. This might happen with the challenge of feeding multiple children at one time. The caregiver's focus may be diverted, and he/she may miss cues a baby is sending about hunger and fullness or opportunities to engage in a responsive mealtime conversation.

Why is it important to avoid non-responsive feeding?

If caregivers do not watch closely, it is easy to overfeed infants and toddlers. Regular overfeeding can eventually override a child's internal controls, so that they no longer have appropriate hunger and fullness cues, or don't recognize those cues. Nonresponsive feeding can lead to overweight infants and toddlers, which is becoming more frequent in the United States.