



Is how we feed infants just as important as what we feed them?

Nutrition during the first year of life lays the foundation for future growth and development. The main source of nutrition during that time is breastmilk and/or infant formula. Around six months of age, we can begin introducing a variety of developmentally appropriate table foods. How we feed infants these foods can be just as important as what we feed them.

The social interactions caregivers and infants have during feeding times can create a special bond. Developing a positive feeding relationship between caregiver and infant has many additional benefits. It builds trust and enjoyment of feeding. Caregivers can feel like an expert on their infant's needs and confident in how to respond.

Positive interactions around feeding times also influence an infant's growth and development. When adults pay attention to and respond to infant's cues for hunger and fullness, infants can practice self-regulation. Self-regulation is the ability to see a feeling or behavior and pause before taking action to manage those feelings and behaviors. A positive feeding relationship promotes development of fine and gross motor skills for eating. It can also support a healthy eating pattern for all.

Caregivers can create positive feeding relationships in many ways. First, notice and respond to early hunger and fullness cues. Mouth opening and rooting are early cues for hunger. Stopping sucking and turning head away or spitting out nipple are early cues for fullness. Respond to these cues rather than feed a prescribed amount on a certain schedule. Avoid forcing infants to eat or drink. Hold infants when breast or bottle feeding. Provide calm, relaxed places for feeding. Talk to infants during feeding. Sit with infants while they eat and let them determine the pace. Help them learn how to feed themselves.

These seemingly small actions make a big difference. Adding one or more of these approaches to your feeding routine can promote lifelong nutrition and health benefits.

References

United States Department of Agriculture. (2019, April). *WIC Infant Nutrition and Feeding*. <https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/resources/infant-nutrition-and-feeding-guide>

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