



SERIES 1 · CONNECTION, SAFETY, AND BELONGING

Listening to Our Growing Bodies

How caregivers can support children's awareness of hunger, fullness, energy, comfort, and enjoyment without food pressure or body judgment.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 1 - Connection, Safety, and Belonging | 16-18 minutes

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Resources for Caregivers publications provide general educational and informational material informed by research, professional literature, and caregiving practice. Every child, caregiver, family, and situation is different. The ideas are intended to support awareness, reflection, learning, and informed decision-making; they are not a substitute for individualized medical, developmental, mental-health, educational, therapeutic, legal, financial, or other professional advice.

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AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 16-18 minutes

Central idea: Children can build a trusting relationship with food when caregivers help them notice hunger, fullness, energy, comfort, and enjoyment without pressure or judgment.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Help children recognize the different messages their bodies send.
- 2 Explore food through the senses without requiring a taste.
- 3 Offer variety and structure without labeling foods as morally “good” or “bad.”
- 4 Use awareness - not correction - as the foundation for thoughtful choices.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

A NOTE ABOUT FEEDING AND GROWTH

Appetite and body cues vary by child, age, day, health, medication, development, and sensory needs. Caregivers can provide regular opportunities to eat and a variety of appropriate foods; children can decide whether and how much to eat from what is offered. Do not use food as a reward or punishment, and do not tie a child's height, weight, appetite, or food choices to praise, shame, or personal worth. Growth is best understood as a pattern over time with a pediatric healthcare professional. If you are concerned about eating,

growth, nutrition, allergies, swallowing, or distress around food, consult your child's clinician or a registered dietitian.

Learn to Hear Body Messages

Children's bodies are always communicating.

They may notice an empty feeling before lunch, a comfortable feeling partway through a meal, thirst after running, sleepiness at the end of a long day, or renewed energy after eating and resting. These messages are not rules or tests. They are information.

When caregivers make room for children to notice that information, children can gradually develop trust in their own experiences. The goal is not to teach fear of certain foods or to produce perfect eating. It is to help children become curious observers of their bodies.

Food supports growth, movement, learning, play, repair, connection, and pleasure. A healthy relationship with food can hold all of those purposes at once.

Big Idea: Awareness Begins with Curiosity

Adults often move quickly toward correction:

- *You must be hungry.*
- *You have had enough.*

- *Take three more bites.*
- *You cannot be full already.*

Even when these statements come from care, they can crowd out a child's opportunity to recognize internal signals.

Try replacing certainty with curiosity:

- What is your body telling you?
- Does your stomach feel empty, comfortable, or very full?
- Would you like more, or are you finished for now?
- Are you hungry, thirsty, tired, or in need of a break?

Young children may not know the answer. They may change their minds or confuse one sensation with another. That is part of learning. Body awareness develops through repeated, low-pressure opportunities to notice.

The perception of sensations inside the body is often called **interoception**. Hunger and fullness are two examples, but the broader skill also includes noticing thirst, temperature, tension, tiredness, pain, and the need to use the bathroom. Children differ in how clearly and consistently they perceive or describe these signals.

Talk About What Food Helps Us Do

Children often hear food described in moral categories: *good*, *bad*, *clean*, *junk*, or *a guilty pleasure*. That language can easily become attached to the person eating it.

Use neutral, useful descriptions instead:

- Different foods offer different kinds of nourishment.
- Carbohydrate foods can provide energy for movement and thought.
- Protein foods help the body build and repair tissue.
- Fats support energy, growth, and the absorption of certain nutrients.
- Fruits and vegetables offer many vitamins, minerals, flavors, colors, and textures.
- Water helps the body work well and replaces fluid we lose.
- Familiar, cultural, celebratory, and simply enjoyable foods can also bring pleasure, memory, and connection.

No single meal needs to do everything, and no single food defines a child's health. Patterns develop across many meals and many days.

KEEP NUTRITION LANGUAGE SIMPLE

Match the explanation to the child's interest. A preschooler may only need, “This gives us energy to play.” An older child

may want to know more about nutrients or digestion.

Information should support curiosity, not persuade a child to take another bite.

Offer Structure Without Creating a Food Hierarchy

Caregivers can support nourishment by deciding what foods are available, when meals and snacks happen, and where the family eats. Children can listen to their own bodies as they decide whether and how much to eat from what is offered.

Aim for regular meals and snacks with variety over time. When possible, include a familiar food alongside less familiar foods. Let celebration foods and sweets be part of family life without making them a prize for eating something else.

Requiring vegetables before dessert can unintentionally teach that vegetables are the unpleasant task and dessert is the reward. Instead, keep the adult's job focused on calm structure and the child's job focused on eating and body cues.

This does not require unlimited access to every food. It means setting boundaries without shame:

- “These are the foods available for snack.”
- “We will have another eating time after the park.”
- “The cookies are part of tonight's meal.”
- “You do not have to taste it. It can stay on your plate.”

Predictability helps children learn that food will be available again. Permission to stop helps them practice recognizing comfort and fullness.

Notice Growth Beyond a Ruler

Growing bodies need nourishment, rest, movement, healthcare, safety, and loving relationships. Genetics and many other factors also shape how a child grows.

If your family enjoys marking height at home, keep it occasional, neutral, and separate from meals or food choices. A taller measurement is not a grade, and a child's growth should never become a competition. Pediatric professionals interpret growth by looking at patterns over time rather than celebrating a particular percentile.

Make the wider picture of growth easier to see:

- What can your child do now that once required help?
- Which feeling can they name more clearly?
- How have their coordination, patience, confidence, or independence changed?
- What new question have they learned to ask?
- How are they learning to care for themselves or someone else?

Much of a child's most important growth cannot be measured with a ruler.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

At one meal or snack, replace one instruction with one neutral observation or question:

- “You paused for a moment. What are you noticing?”
- “Would you like more, or are you comfortable?”
- “That food is crunchy. What else do you notice?”

Accept “I don't know” as a complete answer. Awareness grows through practice, not performance.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- When do I decide what my child must be feeling?
- Which words do I use to describe foods - and what values might those words imply?
- Do our meal and snack routines offer enough predictability?
- Can my child stop eating without pressure, bargaining, or disappointment?
- What kind of growth have I noticed that cannot be measured?

Trust grows when a child's experience is met with curiosity rather than contradiction.

Practice Awareness at the Table

Eat With All the Senses

Eating is a whole-body experience. Before food reaches the mouth, children may notice its color, shape, smell, temperature, texture, or sound.

Sensory exploration can make unfamiliar food less mysterious. It also gives children many ways to participate. Tasting is one option, not the price of joining the activity.

Invite the senses one at a time:

- **Sight:** What colors, shapes, or patterns do you see?
- **Smell:** Is the scent strong, gentle, familiar, or new?
- **Touch:** Does it feel smooth, rough, firm, soft, dry, or slippery?
- **Sound:** Does it crunch, crackle, fizz, or make almost no sound?
- **Taste:** If you choose to taste it, is it sweet, sour, salty, bitter, savory, spicy, or difficult to describe?

There is no correct response. One person may find a smell comforting while another finds it intense. A texture may be enjoyable today and unwelcome tomorrow.

Children can explore in stages: looking, having the food nearby, serving it, touching it with a utensil, smelling it,

touching it, licking it, tasting it, or deciding not to interact. Avoid turning those stages into a ladder the child must climb. The goal is familiarity and curiosity, not compliance.

RESPECT SENSORY DIFFERENCES

Some children experience food sensations very intensely or have feeding, oral-motor, developmental, or medical needs. Allow a child to decline touching, smelling, or tasting. A separate plate, utensil, or some distance from a food may make participation more comfortable. Seek professional support when food causes persistent distress, pain, gagging, choking, nutritional concern, or a very restricted range of accepted foods.

Let Flavor Grow Naturally

Flavor does not need to come only from added sugar or salt. Herbs, spices, citrus, aromatics, and different cooking methods can introduce a wide range of tastes and smells.

Invite children into safe, age-appropriate preparation:

- smell basil, mint, rosemary, cilantro, or another herb used by your family;
- tear washed herb leaves into a dish;
- compare a fresh herb with its dried version;
- squeeze citrus with help;

- stir a dip or sprinkle a seasoning; or
- help care for a small windowsill herb plant.

Use ingredients that are safe for your child and family, supervise kitchen tasks, and wash hands and produce. Participation can build familiarity, but it does not obligate a child to taste the finished food.

Ask descriptive questions rather than leading ones. *“What do you notice?”* leaves more room for an honest answer than *“Doesn't that smell delicious?”*

Check In Without Monitoring Every Bite

A brief body check-in can help children connect sensations with words. Constant questioning, however, can make a meal feel like an assessment.

Choose one natural moment - perhaps before serving seconds or near the end of a meal - and wonder together:

- How did your body feel before we began?
- What do you notice now?
- Are you still hungry, comfortably satisfied, very full, or not sure?
- Would more food feel helpful, or would you rather be finished?

Model your own awareness without turning it into a rule for anyone else:

“I was very hungry when we sat down. I ate quickly at first, so I am pausing to notice whether I want more.”

Avoid praising a clean plate, commenting on the amount eaten, or asking a child to earn dessert. If a child's answer seems surprising, stay curious. Appetite can vary considerably from meal to meal.

Let the Atmosphere Teach

Children learn about eating not only from the food offered, but also from the emotional atmosphere around it.

When possible, create a mealtime that feels predictable and welcoming. Sit together, reduce distractions, and allow conversation that is not centered only on eating. A warm atmosphere does not require an elaborate meal or a perfectly calm family. It can be as simple as placing phones aside for part of the meal, asking about one moment from the day, or letting a spill remain an ordinary accident.

Adults can also notice their own habits:

- Am I rushing so quickly that I miss my own cues?
- Do I talk about needing to “make up for” something I ate?
- Do I criticize my body in front of my child?

- Do I use food to manage every uncomfortable feeling?
- What would a little more presence look like today?

Children do not need flawless models. They benefit from adults who can notice, reflect, and begin again.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Choose one familiar food and describe it together using the senses. Each person may look, smell, touch, listen, taste, or pass.

Keep the language observational:

- “I hear a crunch.”
- “The inside is a different color.”
- “That smell is strong for me.”
- “I don’t feel ready to taste it today.”

Curiosity counts even when no one takes a bite.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Which senses does my child naturally use when approaching food?
- Can my child participate in food exploration without tasting?
- Do my questions invite description, or do they hint at a preferred answer?

- How often do hunger and fullness become the main topic of the meal?
- What does my own language teach about food and bodies?

A welcoming experience can be valuable even when eating does not change.

Let Awareness Guide Choice

Share a Meal of Many Senses

Choose one family meal or snack this week for a gentle noticing activity. If possible, reduce television, phones, and other distractions for part of the time. Adapt the setting to your family's access and sensory needs.

Before or during the meal, become explorers together. Pick only a few questions so the experience still feels like a meal:

- Which food has the strongest scent?
- Which food makes the most noticeable sound?
- What texture surprised you?
- Which colors do you see?
- What does your body notice as the meal continues?

Everyone may answer differently. Anyone may pass. The purpose is not to identify the healthiest eater or make a child finish something. It is to practice paying attention.

End by naming growth that has nothing to do with body size. Perhaps someone tried a new kitchen task, described a sensation, respected another person's "no," waited patiently, asked a thoughtful question, or helped make the table welcoming.

Celebrate curiosity, confidence, kindness, patience, and independence. Sometimes the most important growth is the kind no ruler can measure.

Give Awareness and Listening Shared Language

Two words capture the heart of this brief:

- **Awareness:** Paying attention to what our bodies, minds, relationships, and surroundings may be telling us.
- **Listen:** Noticing a message with curiosity and deciding how to respond.

Listening to the body does not mean every signal is perfectly clear or that every desire must be acted on immediately. It means treating sensations as useful information rather than something to ignore, fear, or judge.

Caregivers provide safety, rhythm, access, and boundaries. Children bring their own sensations, preferences, appetite, and developing judgment. Healthy feeding makes room for both.

Connect Awareness with Story

One suggested storybook connection is ***Lola Plants a Garden*** by Anna McQuinn, illustrated by Rosalind Beardshaw.

Lola plans, plants, waters, waits, and celebrates her garden. Her story offers a gentle way to talk about caring for living things with attention and patience.

After reading, you might ask:

- What did Lola notice as the garden changed?
- What kind of care did the garden need?
- What helps you care for your body?
- What helps you notice when you need food, water, movement, rest, comfort, or connection?

The comparison does not need to be exact. Its value lies in the shared idea that care begins with attention.

The Connected Caregiver Principle

Wisdom grows when we learn to listen.

Listening is one of life's most important skills. We listen to our bodies, to one another, to nature, and to the experiences that help us learn.

Children do not develop awareness overnight. It grows through ordinary moments when someone slows down long enough to wonder beside them.

When adults respond to hunger and fullness without pressure, offer food with calm structure, make sensory exploration optional, and speak about bodies without judgment, children receive a consistent message:

Your experience matters, and you can learn from it.

Awareness can then become a foundation for thoughtful choices - not because children have memorized perfect rules, but because they are learning to pause, notice, reflect, and respond with care.

Your Two-Week Invitation

For the next two weeks, practice **noticing rather than correcting**.

Notice:

- when your child recognizes hunger or asks for food;
- when they communicate that they have had enough;
- which sensory qualities invite curiosity or hesitation;
- which routines make eating feel more predictable;
- which conversations help your family connect; and
- how your own presence influences the atmosphere.

Instead of ending the day with only *“What did my child eat?”* add a second question:

“What did my child notice, communicate, or learn?”

This is not a reason to ignore nutrition or growth concerns. It is a way to observe the relationship developing around food as well as the food itself.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Keep a short, private record of one noticing moment each day for two weeks. Focus on communication and context rather than quantities, calories, weight, or “successful” foods.

Examples:

- “Asked for a snack after active play.”
- “Said the kitchen smell felt too strong and chose to sit farther away.”
- “Stopped eating and asked to save the rest.”
- “Helped tear herbs and described the scent.”

Look for patterns with curiosity. If a pattern raises a health or feeding concern, share factual observations with an appropriate professional.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- When did my child communicate a body message clearly?

- How did I respond when their appetite differed from my expectation?
- Which moments created curiosity without pressure?
- What helped our family feel connected at the table?
- What would it mean for me to trust and guide at the same time?

Awareness grows through thousands of ordinary moments of being heard.

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Creating Predictable Days That Support Emotional Safety offers more guidance for noticing and naming emotions without insisting on one interpretation. *Working Side by Side* considers how children can remain connected while developing independent engagement. *Learning Through Practice* explores how rest, adjustment, accommodation, and support help learning remain accessible. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

The greatest gift we can give children is not perfect nutrition. It is a relationship with food and the body grounded in trust, structure, curiosity, and care.

Children learn this relationship when caregivers offer regular opportunities to eat, provide variety without moral labels, respect hunger and fullness signals, and make sensory exploration optional.

They also learn it when adults treat growth as more than a number. Confidence, communication, coordination, patience, independence, and connection are all meaningful forms of development.

Healthy eating is one expression of a larger life skill: learning to pay attention.

Wisdom grows each time we pause, notice, reflect, and choose with care.

Learn · Connect · Grow

LEARN

What is one idea from this publication that you want to remember?

CONNECT

What did this publication help you notice or reconsider about the person in your care, your relationship, or your circumstances?

GROW

What is one small, safe, manageable action you may try, practice, or pay attention to next?

Research Foundations and Further Reading

The ideas in this brief draw on responsive feeding, pediatric growth guidance, sensory learning, developmental psychology, and relationship-centered caregiving.

Responsive Feeding and Growth

- 1 **National Institutes of Health: Interoception Research.** Defines interoception as sensing, interpreting, integrating, and regulating signals from within the body.
- 2 **CDC: Signs Your Child Is Hungry or Full.** Describes hunger and fullness cues in infants and young children, advises letting the child decide how much to eat, and states that food should not be used as a reward or punishment.
- 3 **American Academy of Pediatrics: 10 Tips for Parents of Picky Eaters.** Encourages family meals, calm exposure to varied foods, attention to hunger, and avoiding pressure or treat-based bribes.

- 4 **American Academy of Pediatrics: Understanding Growth Charts.** Explains that percentiles are not grades and that clinicians are most interested in a child's growth trend over time.
- 5 **American Academy of Pediatrics: Making Sure Your Child Is Eating Enough.** Offers age-aware guidance on portions and recommends consulting a physician or registered dietitian for specific nutrition concerns.

Relationship-Centered Feeding and the Food Environment

- 1 **Ellyn Satter, *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense.*** Satter's relationship-centered approach emphasizes predictable feeding structure, caregiver responsibility for providing food, and respect for a child's developing ability to decide whether and how much to eat.
- 2 **Michael Moss, *Salt Sugar Fat.*** Moss examines how the formulation and marketing of many highly processed foods can influence preferences and consumption. For families, the useful invitation is media and food-environment awareness - not fear, guilt, or moral judgment about eating.

Together, these perspectives support a practical conclusion: caregivers can guide food access and routines while respecting children's developing body awareness. Trust and structure are partners, not opposites.

A FINAL REMINDER

Choose and adapt any idea, reflection prompt, activity, or suggested response based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in your care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when a situation calls for individualized support. If anyone may be in immediate danger, contact the appropriate local emergency or crisis service.

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