



## Teaching children to listen to their bodies, not their plates

You might be familiar with the expression, “Clean your plate.” The desire for children to eat all the food on their plates is a common idea in child-rearing. Your parents or grandparents might have encouraged you to clean your plate. Now you might encourage children or grandchildren to do the same. Often, this well-intentioned statement is a way to minimize food waste or ensure children get enough to eat. However, this practice can be harmful and lead to a child overeating.

When you tell a child to clean their plate, you are teaching them to ignore their body’s signals about hunger and fullness. Over time, a child may completely ignore their body’s messages, making it easier for them to create a habit of overeating. So, how do you encourage your child to listen to their body while making sure they get enough energy in their diet? There are several strategies to help you and your child develop healthy eating practices.

**Avoid pressuring behaviors.** Avoid telling children, “You can’t leave the table until you finish your plate,” or “No sweets ’til you eat all your food.” Instead of pressuring children to eat or offering rewards for eating everything on the plate, try encouraging behaviors like the ones below.

**Start with smaller portion sizes.** Serving smaller portion sizes aligns with recommendations for what kids need to eat throughout the day. Smaller portions can also make new or different foods less overwhelming to try, decrease food waste, and teach them it is OK to ask for seconds. If you are worried about your child being hungry soon after their meal, store their leftovers in the refrigerator for later.

**Encourage children to eat with their belly, not their eyes.** It is important to help children learn to listen to their bodies and not their plates. You can do this by asking how their belly feels. Also be sure to ask children if they are hungry for more food before adding it to their plates and if they are done eating before you take their plates.

**Be a role model for your child.** Children look up to their caregivers as an example of how they should behave. Avoid having the TV on to let you and your child focus on the meal and company around you. This is great bonding time with your child and decreases distractions so your child can focus on their meal.

**Trust children when they tell you they are full.** When thinking about how much food your child might need, it is easy to think in adult amounts instead of child amounts. Children have

smaller stomachs and require less food than an adult to give them the feeling of being satisfied. Through teamwork, your child can listen to and act on their body's cues to continue or stop eating and ultimately figure out the right amount of food to fit their needs.

Children develop eating habits that stick with them throughout their lives, so it is important to support them in honoring their body's signals from an early age. Teaching kids how to listen to their body while they are young can help reduce chances of overeating in the future. Practice the encouraging behaviors listed here to help children, and yourself, listen to their bodies and not their plates!

## References

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