



# Mealtime Mentoring

## Encouraging a Competent Eater

*How can I help the children in my care develop good eating habits?*

### What is a competent eater?

A competent eater:

- enjoys eating and is relaxed about it,
- shows a positive attitude and interest toward foods, including foods which may be unfamiliar,
- knows when she is hungry or full,
- knows how much to eat and when to stop eating, and
- knows how to tolerate moderate hunger or fullness.

Children are born with these skills. Caregivers need to help them **keep these skills** as they mature.

Children also need to **learn other skills** such as:

- using a spoon, fork, and cup,
- eating with other people,
- being calm at eating time,
- being open to try new foods, and
- enjoying regular meal and snack times together.

One of the most important things you can do as a caregiver is to set a good example.

### How can you set a good example?

A good place to begin is by looking at how some of your own beliefs and experiences with food affect the way you eat and provide food for others.

How do you experience food and hunger?

- Do you find eating enjoyable?
- Can you eat moderately without “should” or “should not”?
- Can you eat as much as you like without feeling shameful?
- Do you use Canada’s Food Guide to decide what foods are healthy?
- Do you offer a variety of foods whether you like them or not?
- Do you avoid saying “you must eat this before I give you this” or “are you sure you really want that”?



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**Setting a good example means choosing food based on facts, not myths.**

**Myth – It is my job as the caregiver to get the children to eat.**

**Fact** – It is the caregiver’s responsibility to offer the children a variety of healthy foods to choose from. It is the children’s job to decide how much they will eat, or whether they will eat at all. Children will usually eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full. They should be trusted to listen to their appetites. Offer new foods as well as foods that are familiar to the children. Encourage structure around mealtime by having a set time when the children are together and food is served.

**Myth – Fat is bad.**

**Fact** – Fat is essential for healthy growth and development of children. Nutritious food such as milk, peanut butter, and cheese should not be restricted because of their fat content. These foods are a nutritious source of dietary fat.

**Myth – Healthy foods are always more expensive.**

**Fact** – Serving healthy foods does not have to be expensive. Beans and lentils can replace meat in soup, stews and casseroles. Choose seasonal and frozen vegetables and fruit.

**Myth – Sugar causes hyperactivity.**

**Fact** – Sugar has not been shown to cause hyperactivity. Sugar is a culprit for cavities and may affect obesity and weight gain. If children fill up on highly

sweetened foods they may not have room for more nutritious foods.

**Myth – Brown sugar is better than white.**

**Fact** – Brown sugar contains molasses. White sugar does not. The molasses provides insignificant amounts of minerals. Using brown sugar instead of white is not necessarily healthier.

**Myth – Raw vegetables and fruit are more nutritious than frozen or canned.**

**Fact** – Fresh, frozen and canned vegetables and fruit all have good nutrition. Just-picked garden vegetables should be rich in nutrients. Frozen and canned vegetables and fruit are processed just after picking which preserves many of the nutrients. They are convenient to have on hand and to use. Choose those that do not have added sugar, salt, or fat. Fresh vegetables or fruit that have been stored for a long time may lose some of their nutrient content. Children often prefer fresh vegetables and fruit because they like the crunchy texture.



*Helping you provide healthy food and a positive eating environment in early learning and child care settings.*