

Adults' interactions at mealtimes influence children's future relationships with food

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Two University of Houston researchers are developing strategies to help parents artfully sidestep showdowns at the family table. The goal is to reign in mealtime angst early in children's lives so they can nurture

positive relationships with food that can carry them into healthy adulthood.

In an article in the journal *Appetite*, the research team reveals that guiding [children](#) in recognizing their innate sense of fullness and helping them understand the importance of responding to its cues are two key elements in what is referred to as responsive feeding practices. The term is used by psychologists and other experts to describe parental attentiveness and engagement during feeding that affect children's overall attitudes and behavior around food.

By way of clarifying the concept of responsive feeding practices, you might bring to mind its opposites—the nonresponsive feeding practices: Enforcing the 'clean plate club,' for example, whether a young eater is hungry or not. Or offering yummy dessert as a bribe for trudging through yucky vegetables or tedious chores.

Such unfortunate directions can encourage lifelong overeating, explained Leslie A. Frankel, associate professor in the Human Development and Family Sciences Program at the College of Education, and Ritu Sampige, a [biomedical sciences](#) senior in the UH Honors College, and the article's first author.

"We consider those types of nonresponsive feeding practices to be less optimal because they override children's ability to internally regulate how much food they should consume," Sampige said.

In addition to paying attention to hunger and fullness cues, adults guide the mealtime atmosphere with attitudes they bring to the family table, even when they do not realize it. Staying positively involved with their children throughout family meals can make lasting differences.

"It's not a black-and-white issue. Parents tend to use a lot of tactics to get

their children to eat and behave and do all the things we need them to do. The key difference is the level to which parents are engaged at mealtime and how successful they are in avoiding nonresponsive eating behaviors and food rewards," Frankel said.

Frankel and Sampige, with fellow research colleague and co-author Caroline Bena Kuno, of the Department of Psychology at the Virginia State University, are uncovering an unrecognized tie-in with parents' mental health status.

Previous research has noted that children of parents who suffer from anxiety or depression are, themselves, more likely to experience general mental health issues. But until now, few studies have linked the issue specifically with children's resiliency around the temptations of [food](#).

"Parents who are more able to be responsive in the moment tend to be more successful in guiding their children on good paths to healthy eating. Helping parents get the support they need is crucial for many reasons. And now we know one more, that success at the family table involves the parents' ability to be engaged with children and provide in-the-moment responses to each child's fullness cues," Frankel explained.

But take it all in balance, she stressed. "Food is often at the center of celebration, and that's a beautiful thing. So are [family](#) trips out for [ice cream](#) and the joyful times children have with their families and friends. The important factor is not to adhere too strictly to rules—or expect every mealtime to go smoothly—but to help [parents](#) steer toward feeding practices that appreciate children's innate sense of when to stop eating and regular mealtime rituals that honor everyone around the table," she said.

More information: Ritu Sampige et al, Mental health matters: Parent mental health and children's emotional eating, *Appetite* (2022). [DOI](#):

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