

How To Promote Intuitive Eating in Adolescents

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Many parents get concerned about whether their child is eating too much or too little food. As a child ages into adolescence, they naturally begin to eat more as their body grows. During this time of growth, it is crucial that adolescents establish or continue to maintain a healthy relationship with food, as this can impact long-term eating patterns after adolescence (Cadena-Schlam & López-Guimerà, 2014; Kumar et al., 2018).

Intuitive eating is a pattern of eating that includes awareness of hunger and fullness cues and encourages an appropriate and respectful response to them. It is a non-diet approach to eating and is not focused on weight loss or weight gain—although changes in weight can occur for individuals who adopt or practice intuitive eating. This fact sheet will discuss how to promote intuitive eating in adolescents as a way to build a healthier relationship with food and improve body image.

What Is Intuitive Eating?

Intuitive eating includes awareness on recognizing hunger and fullness cues and encourages an appropriate and respectful response to them to regulate food intake (Tribole & Resch, 2012). Hunger cues can include a growling stomach, low energy, dizziness, and abdominal pain while fullness cues range from feeling satisfied, mild bloating, and lack of hunger cues (Tribole & Resch, 2012). Intuitive eating focuses on building a healthy connection



A Family Enjoys Breakfast at the Table

Source: Unsplash

with one's mind, body, and the food they are consuming. Intuitive eating has 10 main principles, five of which are highlighted below (Tribole & Resch, 2012):

- 1) **Reject the diet mentality.** Don't give into the fantasy of a new or better diet that will magically and unrealistically shed pounds.
- 2) **Make peace with food.** Allow unconditional permission to eat what one desires when hungry.

- 3) **Cope with your emotions with kindness.** Eat to satisfy physical hunger cues rather than for emotional reasons.
- 4) **Feel your fullness.** Rely on the hunger and satiety cues to determine when and how much to eat.
- 5) **Discover the satisfaction factor.** Practice mindfulness around how foods make one's body feel physically, known as body-food choice congruence. This includes taste, smell, nourishment, energy, and decisions related to food (Cadena-Schlam & López-Guimerà, 2014; Tribole & Resch, 2012).

Intuitive eating works by increasing awareness of hunger and fullness cues which is associated with less undereating or overeating. It focuses less on weight and more on how food or eating make you feel. This may mean eating a snack between meals in response to a growling stomach or allowing oneself to enjoy ice cream after a meal until satisfied, not uncomfortable with fullness.

Intuitive Eating Starts With the Parents/Caregivers

Most nutrition professionals agree that children are born natural intuitive eaters. However, eating habits are often unintentionally influenced by parents/caregivers, family and friends, cultural eating habits, and many other environmental factors as they age (Eneli et al., 2008; Moy et al., 2013; Tribole & Resch, 2012). There are several ways that parents can help adolescents retain their innate ability to be intuitive eaters (Tribole & Resch, 2012). These include understanding that, (1) many early adolescents can self-regulate and determine when to begin and end eating, (2) adolescents seek autonomy and desire to have control over their choices, (3) introducing new foods can be difficult for any age and requires persistence, and (4) parents/caregivers have a powerful role in influencing their teen's relationship with food.

There are many ways parents/caregivers can support an adolescent's healthy relationship with food. Table 1 includes phrases to consider when communicating with teens about food. Studies have



A Mother Engages With a Teen While Cooking Healthy Food Together

Source: Pexels

shown that parents/caregivers who also practice intuitive eating and reject the diet mentality tend to be less concerned about their adolescent's weight and do not restrict food intake (Tylka et al., 2015). Even if adolescents have been restricted from certain foods in the past, they can eventually learn to self-regulate eating (Eneli et al., 2008).

Table 1.
Recommendations When Communicating With Adolescents About Food

Avoid	Encourage	Instead Of Saying This...	Say This!
Labeling foods as “good” or “bad.”	An eating pattern high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains (Moy et al., 2013; United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).	Brownies are a bad food! We need to eat good foods, like carrots!	This pear is so yummy! Do you want to take one for a snack today?
Using sweets or other processed foods as rewards. This form of conditioning may cause children to overeat or restrict foods in their future (Andrew et al., 2015; Eneli et al., 2008).	Offering different forms and varieties of foods, keeping in mind that it can take up to 20 exposures for children to increase preference for a food. Parents/caregivers can model positive eating behaviors and enjoyment of all foods.	If you finish all your peas, you can have ice cream for dessert!	I love the way these peas are seasoned. Yum!
Negative statements made about oneself as they can be interpreted by adolescents to be made about themselves.	Remaining neutral about food consumption for both oneself and the adolescent. Offer healthful snacks and food that all members of the family will enjoy (Tribole & Resch, 2012).	I just ate a whole box of cookies; I am so bad!	These cookies are delicious! I’m going to save some to enjoy later.
Restricting adolescents from food. Many studies have found that restricting food in childhood can lead to eating disorders, mental health disorders, and body image issues (Dalen et al., 2010; Schaefer & Magnuson, 2014; Denny, 2013; Tylka et al., 2015).	Consuming food from all food groups (refer to Table 2 for how).	You had a big breakfast. We’re going to skip lunch today.	It’s getting close to lunchtime. How would you rate your level of hunger?

Division of Responsibility in Feeding Adolescents

Parents/caregivers can use the ideas and principles in the Division of Responsibility in Feeding offered by Ellyn Satter (1987) to begin establishing intuitive eating principles with their adolescents. In the Division of Responsibility in Feeding, both the parent/caregiver and adolescent play important roles, as described below.

Understanding the roles that everyone has during eating can help ensure that adolescents are eating the amount of food that is nutritionally adequate for them. Trusting that they know when to stop

Implementing Intuitive Eating in Your Home

For someone who has never consciously practiced intuitive eating, the thought of giving oneself unconditional permission to eat or being allowed to enjoy a variety of foods can feel overwhelming. To introduce an adolescent to intuitive eating, begin teaching them the importance of nutrition early on. Try to offer a variety of foods at the table during meals, healthy snacks and water, and ultimately trust an adolescent's innate hunger and satiety cues (Tribole & Resch, 2012). Table 2 provides a guide of foods that can support intuitive eating.

Division of Responsibility in Feeding

Parent's or Caregiver's Role	Adolescent's Role
Choose and prepare the food.	Choose if they are going to eat.
Provide regular meals with snacks.	Determine how much food they will eat.
Provide a pleasant area to eat with adequate seating.	Stop eating when they are full.
Let children grow up in the body that is meant for them.	Decide how fast/slow they will eat.

eating is crucial (Denny, 2013; Warren et al., 2017). Changing schedules, puberty, and involvement in athletic activities are all factors that need to be considered when using the division of responsibility (Satter, 1987). As an adolescent gets older, they will become more independent, and parents/caregivers will have less control over their nutrition. New expectations will appear, such as the expectation of being at meals, choosing a fruit or vegetable during school lunch, and providing nutritious snacks in the house. It is recommended to refrain from criticizing the adolescent's diet and understand that they are growing and require more nutrients (Moy et al., 2013; Satter, 1987).



A Fridge Full of Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Source: Unsplash

Table 2.
Foods That Support Intuitive Eating

Food Group	Approaches	Food Examples & Preparation Ideas
Fruits	Try to offer a variety, go beyond the apple, banana, or orange with meals and snacks. If fresh fruit is not in season, try dried, canned fruit in 100% fruit juice, or frozen fruit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peel and eat clementines. • Eat frozen raspberries with a chocolate chip in the center. • Wash berries, grapes, and other fruits in bulk so they are ready to eat. • Cut melons into ready-to-eat slices.
Vegetables	Try to offer a variety with meals and snacks, expand past the carrot, broccoli, or lettuce. Try frozen or canned vegetables as a quick side to any meal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green beans and corn make an excellent side dish. • Use a small amount of salad dressing for dipping. • Wash and chop up all vegetables so they are ready to eat. • Purchase no-prep veggies, such as baby carrots, cherry tomatoes, and sugar snap peas.
Dairy	Try low- or fat-free options. Aim for three servings a day. Yogurts with no added sugars are great snacks that offer protein and calcium.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eat cheese sticks. • Buy yogurt/cottage cheese in bulk and separate it into ready-to-eat portions. • Pair plain yogurt with fresh fruit and/or whole grain granola. • For extra protein, choose Greek yogurt
Grains	Make half your grains whole grains. Aim to incorporate grains with each meal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy rice, oats, and other grains in bulk. • Try whole grains like brown rice as a side to dishes full of vegetables. • Bread can be frozen for weeks to help preserve it longer. • High fiber crackers and low-fat popcorn are great snack ideas!
Meats	Try lean meats that complement the meal but are not the main dish.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eat turkey meatballs. • Cube ham to eat with cubed cheese. • Bake chicken with spices for a tasty and easy meat option. • Look for “loin” or “round” when purchasing beef and pork, as they are leaner cuts.
Fun Foods	Allow these to be in the house, but not in abundance. Never restrict these foods, rather, encourage eating other food groups first.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Store these foods in areas that are not highly visible. • Purchase foods in portion sizes that are not overwhelming. • Have a plan for moving on to a non-food activity as soon as you feel satisfied. • If making a comfort food, experiment with different, more nutritious ingredients. But if you are craving ice cream, have ice cream!

Source: Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2021

Healthy Eating Across the Lifespan

Having a healthy relationship with food begins during infancy (Satter, 1987). Promoting intuitive eating through adolescence is associated with healthy eating patterns, body acceptance, and mental health (Dalen et al., 2010; Denny et al., 2013; Moy et al., 2013; Warren et al., 2017). The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics encourages health professionals to promote intuitive eating to achieve positive physical and psychological effects (Schaefer & Magnuson, 2014). Mindful eating begins with the parents/caregivers, as their eating habits can influence and affect feeding styles as their child ages (Satter, 1987; Tylka et al., 2015). As a child grows into adolescence, their eating habits evolve into life-long habits. Learning and implementing intuitive eating practices can help children, adolescents, and adults improve their relationship with food and improve their body image.

Summary

Intuitive eating is an eating pattern that can be learned and implemented. However, one can lose sensitivity to their hunger and fullness cues as they age. A parent's or caregiver's role is providing a pleasant environment to eat with a variety of fruits and vegetables while allowing freedom of food choices without restriction. Implementing intuitive eating in one's family can lead to healthier relationships with food, increased awareness of fullness cues, and positive body image.



Source: Unsplash

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