

EATING

What Is This Developmental Skill?

Eating involves recognizing hunger and fullness, tolerating different foods, using utensils, remaining at the table, and participating in family meals. It includes physical, sensory, emotional, relational, and cultural experiences.

How Does This Normally Develop?

Infants depend completely on caregivers for feeding. Through responsive feeding, children learn that hunger will be noticed and food will be provided. They gradually explore textures, tastes, utensils, and family mealtime routines. Repeated exposure helps children expand the foods they can tolerate and enjoy. Children vary widely in appetite and food preferences.

How Can Neglect Interfere With Its Development?

Children who experienced food insecurity may have learned that food is unpredictable. They may eat rapidly, overeat, hide food, or become anxious when food is unavailable. Others may have had limited exposure to textures and food varieties. Stress and sensory sensitivities can also interfere with appetite and mealtime participation.

A child may view food as something that must be obtained and protected rather than something reliably provided by caregivers.

What Might This Look Like?

The child may:

- Eat very quickly or continue eating beyond fullness.
- Hide, store, or take food without permission.
- Become anxious when meals are delayed.
- Ask repeatedly when the next meal will occur.
- Refuse many foods or tolerate only certain textures.
- Struggle to use utensils.
- Become emotionally dysregulated during meals.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers should establish predictable meals and snacks and reassure the child that food will remain available. Keeping a designated snack basket may help some children feel secure. Food should not be used as punishment, reward, or a source of shame.

Persistent feeding concerns, growth problems, choking, or extreme food restriction may require medical or feeding-specialist evaluation.

From Understanding to Attunement

Food-related behavior often reflects earlier uncertainty rather than greed or manipulation.

An attuned response might be: "You do not have to worry about when you will eat again. There will be another snack, and I will make sure you have enough."

