

# Responsive feeding for lunchboxes



## Key features of responsive feeding:

- ✓ Parents decide **what food is packed** in the lunchbox.
- ✓ Children decide **what and how much to eat** (out of what is packed).
- ✓ Children can eat their food **in any order**.
- ✓ A child's **hunger and fullness cues are respected** - they are not forced to finish food if they are full, and extra food is available if they are still hungry.
- ✓ The child is **not pressured** to eat.

Practicing responsive feeding from the beginning respects a child's natural cues.

It builds trust in their ability to self-regulate, lays the groundwork for developing healthy eating habits, and promotes a positive relationship with food.

**Introducing responsive feeding principles to lunchbox routines might feel challenging at first. If you are unsure how to respond in a particular situation, consider how you can offer support around eating while still ensuring that:**



- ✓ The child does not feel pressure to eat or shame or guilt about the food provided.
- ✓ The child maintains a level of autonomy over food choices.

## Using neutral language

At mealtimes it's best to use neutral language about foods, particularly when referring to children's lunchboxes.

**To avoid feelings of guilt, shame, or anxiety, avoid:**

- ✗ Labelling food as good, bad or unhealthy.
- ✗ Making comments about lunchboxes in front of children.



**Instead, try:**

- ✓ Speaking neutrally about food. Simply refer to foods by their name.
- ✓ Encouraging discussion about the colour, shape, flavour and texture of food.
- ✓ Allowing children to explore foods by looking, smelling, touching and licking.



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## Munch & Move: Responsive mealtimes

Mealtimes are an opportunity to support not only children's enjoyment of healthy foods but also their social, emotional, and learning outcomes. It is recommended that mealtimes are positive and enjoyable for children and carers.

### Look for hunger and fullness cues in young children

#### For infants:

Watch for cues that the **child may still be hungry** such as:

- Becomes excited or focuses intently on food
- Reaches for food, or opens mouth when food approaches

Watch for cues the **child may be full** such as:

- Pushes food away or spits food out
- Slows down or loses interest in food
- Becomes fussy, arches back, turns head away or closes mouth



#### For preschoolers:

Support children to communicate if they are full or if they need more food. Try asking children to notice how hungry or full they are before and after meals to help them recognise and respond to these cues. It can be helpful to let children know when there will be another chance to eat, such as after nap time.

Avoid using food to manage emotions or to reward behaviour. For example, it's best not to say things like "If you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert".

### Try a flexible approach at mealtimes

A flexible approach to mealtimes and giving children more autonomy over what they eat can:

- Support children to eat according to their natural appetite.
- Reduce feelings of pressure or stress around food.

#### We can do this by:

- Being flexible around what food can be eaten at morning tea and lunch. For example, many primary schools serve lunch before recess, as children are often hungriest early in the day.
- Not insisting that some foods should be eaten before others.

#### Tip

To help guide children to make decisions around foods to eat now or later, you might ask:

"Would you like something small?"

"How hungry is your tummy feeling?"

"Do you need your big meal now?"



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## Common Concerns

**“When I let children choose what they want to eat, they always eat the less healthy foods first and often leave the healthier options.”**

It's best not to insist children eat certain foods first. Healthy eating can be supported with strategies such as role modelling healthy eating at mealtimes and programming food learning experiences. You can also support parents to pack more healthier options in the lunchbox.

**“If I tell children they can eat as much as they want, some children eat all their food at morning tea and leave nothing for lunch.”**

New approaches to responsive feeding encourage more flexibility in what and when children eat during the day. It's worth reflecting on whether there's a genuine reason for children to eat specific foods at set times — or if it's simply out of habit. For example, you may find that children are often hungriest earlier in the day.

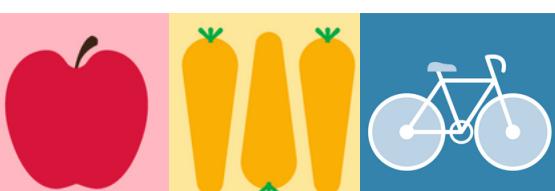
Families can be encouraged to pack food in clearly labelled sections for morning tea and lunch. Extra food can be offered from the lunchbox if a child is hungry later.



- ✓ Encourage families to **pack a balanced lunchbox**
- ✓ Encourage families to **pack the lunchbox with their child**, ask them to choose the types of fruit and vegetables to include.
- ✓ **Role model** healthy eating in front of children.

### Tip

Fluctuations in appetite and food preferences are a normal part of development.



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## “Can we still refer to food as sometimes and everyday foods?”

Munch & Move recommends using the terms ‘**everyday foods**’ and ‘**sometimes foods**’ when talking about making balanced food choices.



‘**Everyday foods**’ - are nutritious foods that children should eat most of the time. They help children grow, learn and play. These foods include fruit and vegetables; wholegrain foods; lean meat, eggs and legumes; dairy foods and water for drinks.



‘**Sometimes foods**’ - are less nutritious foods that are best eaten only occasionally. They are often high in sugar, salt or fat and are not necessary for a healthy diet.

However, it is best that these terms aren’t used as part of discussions at mealtimes, particularly when referring to food in children’s lunchboxes.

## “If we tell children they can eat whatever they want, they often leave foods half eaten, resulting in food waste.”

When children are given autonomy to choose foods from their lunchbox, they may sometimes leave foods half-eaten or avoid those they find less appealing.

Share these tips with families to help minimise food waste, while supporting children’s independence:

- ✓ **Use resealable, reusable containers** – these help keep food fresh and allow children to save leftovers for later.
- ✓ **Involve children in packing their lunchbox** – this can increase interest in the food provided.
- ✓ **Oversized portions** can lead to waste. Encourage families to pack smaller, manageable amounts.
- ✓ **Too many new items** at once can be overwhelming. Suggest introducing one new food at a time alongside familiar favourites.



### Tip

Educators can gently check in with children to understand why a food wasn’t finished. For example, “Did you forget you had started your yoghurt?” can prompt reflection without pressuring them to eat.



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