

Eating Competence: Nutrition Education with the Satter Eating Competence Model

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The Satter Eating Competence Model (ecSatter) conceptualizes eating competence as having 4 components: eating attitudes, food acceptance, regulation of food intake and body weight, and management of the eating context (including family meals). According to ecSatter competent eaters are confident, comfortable, and flexible with eating and are matter-of-fact and reliable about getting enough to eat of enjoyable and nourishing food.¹ The ecSatter Inventory (ecSI), a reliable and validated 16-question, paper-and-pencil assessment tool, assesses the 4 components of eating competence.² (To access the ecSI, obtain permission for use and receive further information about scoring and application, write ecSI@EllynSatter.com.)

The priority with ecSatter is enhancing and dignifying the importance of eating by making it positive, joyful, and intrinsically rewarding. The ecSatter practitioner makes individuals the priority by waiting to be asked before offering meal-management or any other food-management advice, joins with individuals right where they are, supports their efforts in feeding themselves, respects their food preferences, and trusts their inherent capabilities and tendencies to learn and grow.³

Problems with eating competence can range from the simple and straightforward to the involved and even entrenched. The nutrition educator's task is to do primary interven-

tion: education, anticipatory guidance, and early problem solving. The level of the intervention is dictated not by the level of complexity of the problem, but by the level of services that can be delivered.

EATING ATTITUDES

The primary attitudinal goal with ecSatter is to establish and maintain positive and flexible attitudes about eating, which in turn allow being responsively attuned to outer and inner experiences relative to eating. Individuals do best with food management when they have a relaxed self-trust about food and eating and are able to experience harmony among food desires, food choices, and amounts eaten.¹

Build Relationships

Eating is more than deciding what and how much to eat—it is about the connection with our bodies and with life itself. Eating reflects our history, as well as our relationships with ourselves and with others. Advising someone else how to manage his or her eating is about the connection between you and that other person, about trusting or controlling and about accepting or rejecting.⁴

Make building relationships your priority. A person's foodways are intensely personal and private. Sharing with you in your role of nutrition professional the intimate details of food management carries the risk of criticism and shame—but also the possibility of support and admiration. Be accepting and back your participants up; don't criticize or undermine them. Your regard will enhance your value, position you to be helpful, and increase the likelihood that your participants will accept your help with food management.

But far more importantly, your regard will contribute toward participants' sense of effectiveness and self-regard. Seeing themselves as being capable can help set them free to be creative and resourceful in finding their own solutions.

Enhance the Dignity and Importance of Eating

Subjective observations indicate that in our culture, eating is a faintly lascivious activity that we trivialize. We conduct it in an off-hand fashion, while distracted with other activities, and give it a minimum of time and attention. Instead, dignify eating, and give it your blessings. Make comments such as:

"Eating is one of life's great pleasures."

"Enjoy your eating."

"Make time for eating,"

"Be dependable about feeding yourself."

Emphasize Providing, Not Depriving

On a fundamental level, eating competence has to do with the behaviors and attitudes that ensure getting *fed*: eating a variety of reasonably nutritious food in amounts adequate to support the demands of life. Motivation to eat a variety of food, including nutritious food, is internal and comes from genuine, learned food preference. When the joy goes out of eating, nutrition suffers.⁴

Avoid prescriptive interventions, including those intended to prevent degenerative disease: fat restriction and modification, salt and sugar restriction, and consumption of more-than-adequate amounts of fruits, vegetables, or whole grains. From the perspective of ecSatter, prescriptive

interventions not only introduce negativity, they represent medical nutrition therapy and are therefore outside the bailiwick of nutrition education. On the other hand, help program participants to see the nutritional value in the food they currently consume. Avoid nutritional criticism, even if it is introduced by the client. It produces resentment, ambivalence, and shame, negative feelings about food selection that are likely to produce inconsistent and negative nutritional behavior.

Address Encoded Messages

Guilt and anxiety are such a part of our relationship with food¹ that even benign messages can take on a negative and moralistic spin in the ears of the hearer. Even if you bend over backwards to be positive, participants may still decode your messages as negative, prescriptive, and judgmental. Consider the possibility that the word *healthful* could decode as, “don’t eat so much; don’t eat the food you like.” Consider whether you can afford to use the word *nutritious*. Is it a neutral term, or does it precipitate expectations of rigid and puritanical food selection, along with restriction and avoidance? If our food guidelines are dreary, they are not sustainable.

Rather than trying to purge your language, ask what nutrition-program participants hear you say. Encourage them to be frank, prepare to have some fun, and don’t take their comments personally. When you say, “have meals,” does it decode as “have broiled chicken breasts and lettuce with no dressing?” When you say, “all food can make a nutritional contribution,” does it decode as “eat it if you must, but it isn’t really very good for you”? When you say, “all food can fit in a healthful diet,” do they expect a catch, such as “don’t eat so much,” “don’t eat it so often,” or “make up for it by eating less of something else”?

Address Feelings

Feelings belong in nutrition education if you keep the discussion closely related

to the task at hand. Unexpressed feelings can act as a barrier to change as well as interfere with your getting on the individual’s wavelength. Ask about meal planning and food selection, and also ask how people feel about their approaches to food management. Many are ashamed of their eating and feel guilty about the food they choose. Those with limited resources may feel ashamed that they have to feed their family canned fruits and vegetables. A recent immigrant may feel ashamed of continuing to choose culturally familiar food.

Correct misinformation, but don’t try to fix feelings. The person’s sharing their feelings with you and your acceptance and affirmation of those feelings diffuses them and is help enough. If you try to change someone’s feelings or life circumstances to achieve nutrition goals, you are doing psychotherapy, not education.

FOOD ACCEPTANCE

The ecSatter approach to nutritional excellence is supported by variety, which in turn is supported by enjoyment and learned food preference. Rather than trying to get participants to eat certain amounts or types of food, support variety by emphasizing pleasure as a guiding principle in food selection.¹

Trust People To Learn and Grow

It is a natural human tendency to learn and grow. As individuals feel successful with food acceptance, they will push themselves along, to the best of their ability, to gradually increase dietary variety.³ Approve of preferred food fixed in preferred ways. That dignifies and supports individual’s efforts to feed themselves and their families as well as neutralizes ambivalence and shame coming from embedded attitudes that “if it tastes good, it can’t be good for me.”

Don’t Get Pushy With Target Food

Introduce the possibility of including fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—at one nutrition counseling session—then let go of it. Repeated reminders increase resistance. Give nutrition information only if the person is interested. Ask, “Do you want to hear about this?” Nutrition information increases willingness to taste novel food in subjects for whom nutrition is important and decreases willingness in subjects for whom nutrition is not important.⁵ Provided the participant is interested, explore ways to make target food items appealing. Salt and fat tone down the bitter flavor of greens or cabbage-family vegetables. A small amount of sugar takes the rough edge off the taste of canned tomatoes. Covering brussels sprouts with water and cooking them in an open pan cuts down on the strong, sulfurous taste. So does adding butter and salt.

Teach Food Acceptance Skills

If participants genuinely want to increase their food repertoire, do experiential programming. Provide opportunities to prepare and taste food (always reassure participants that they don’t have to taste), or suggest food acceptance behaviors to use at home. Research with children⁶ and adults⁷ and clinical experience with adults indicate that acceptance of specific food items increases with repeated, neutral exposure—typically 10 to 20 exposures. However, mothers typically decide an unfamiliar food is disliked after only 3 tries.⁸ Exposures include looking at the food; touching, smelling, and handling it; preparing it; and tasting it over and over. Teach participants to inconspicuously spit unwanted tastes into a napkin. Mouthing the food increases familiarity and acceptance of taste and texture, but having to swallow unfamiliar food is generally experienced as aversive and is likely to decrease food acceptance.

Address barriers to experimenting with novel food. Many participants on tight budgets hesitate to purchase new food for fear it will be wasted.⁹ Ask a group of participants how they address the problem of food waste. You could get into a productive discussion about managing tight budgets in general, feeding children (food waste increases with children in the house¹⁰), or running family food experiments by purchasing and preparing novel food in small amounts.

Address Picky Eating

Picky eating—extreme food selectivity—represents an exaggerated example of poor food acceptance skills. A Google search for the term *picky eaters* delivers over a million hits, among them a Web-based support group for adult picky eaters.¹¹ Picky eaters have difficulty remaining calm in the presence of unfamiliar food and therefore cannot provide themselves with the repeated neutral exposure necessary for learning to like new food. In most cases, adult picky eating is based on childhood food coercion or lack of opportunities to learn, although the stimulus may also be rigid and prescriptive rules about food selection accumulated during adulthood. Begin by relieving social pressure on food acceptance. Coach mealtime social skills to allow the individual to politely but firmly fend off unwanted food. Teach the conventions of socially

acceptable behavior around food. It is socially acceptable to pick and choose from what is on the table, to decline to be served, to eat only 1 or 2 food items from a meal, or to leave unwanted food on the plate. It is not socially acceptable to draw attention to food refusal or to request food that is not on the menu.

REGULATION OF FOOD INTAKE

A person with effective food regulation attitudes and behaviors is comfortable enough with the rhythms of hunger, appetite, and satiety to conform to the social structure of meals and snacks, is relaxed and tuned-in during the eating process, and trusts the experience of satiety. An essential part of trusting internal regulation is accepting the body weight that evolves.¹

Coach Internal Regulation

Based on decades of clinical work, the Table describes typical subjective experiences of hunger, appetite, and satiety. Internal regulators of food intake function most effectively when they are supported by regular, predictable, and rewarding opportunities to eat.

ecSatter maintains a positive tension between discipline and permission. The discipline is structure and

attention: predictable sit-down meals and between-meal snacks, consumed in a tuned-in fashion. The permission is food selection and regulation: choosing preferred food at those regular eating times and eating enough to satisfy hunger and appetite. Permission and discipline reinforce each other. Having rewarding food at meals and snacks makes structure intrinsically rewarding; the planning inherent in structure gives access to rewarding food. Messages that support internal regulation include:

“Your body knows how much you need to eat.”

“Go to the table hungry, eat until you are satisfied.”

“Reassure yourself that another meal or snack is coming soon and you can eat again.”

Encourage Sensitivity To Eating Rhythms

Hunger and appetite adjust to predictable meal-plus-snack routines. Eating when hunger and appetite are noticeable but not overwhelming makes eating more pleasant, supports eating in a tuned-in and orderly fashion, and enhances the ability to stop eating when comfortably full but not stuffed. Messages that support internal regulation in the context of structure include:

“Have meals with the food you

Table. Subjective Experiences of Food-Regulation Cues Relative to the Satter Eating Competence Model

Famished	Extreme hunger, pronounced discomfort: shakiness, crankiness, headache. Urgency and desperation to eat, especially if there is no reassurance of being able to get enough food. Often results from food insecurity or extreme self-restraint.
Hunger, Increased appetite	Physical experience of emptiness, perhaps <i>mild</i> discomfort such as shakiness, fatigue, headache. Tolerable and comfortable anticipation of eating, provided adequate amounts of rewarding food will soon be available. Heightened interest in food.
Hunger goes away	Physical experience of emptiness subsides along with discomfort from energy deficit; sense of relief increases. <i>However</i> , most people are reluctant to stop eating at this point because eating is still rewarding.
Appetite goes away	Satiety: Positive experience of readiness to stop eating. This is a more sustaining and rewarding endpoint to eating for most people than when hunger goes away. Food stops tasting good (but is by no means repulsive) and there is a subjective experience of losing interest in eating.
Feeling full	For most, this is a pleasant, if occasional, endpoint to eating. It is a positive state of feeling filled up. Eating past satiety is rewarding if it follows a deliberate decision to eat more than usual, perhaps on a ceremonial occasion, because food tastes exceptionally good or because energy needs have suddenly increased.
Feeling stuffed	Virtually universally experienced as being a negative endpoint to eating. Negative physical state including extreme fullness, lethargy, physical discomfort, perhaps nausea. Accompanied by aversion toward eating and often a sense of chagrin at overeating and self-indulgence. Often arrived at as an unthinking or impulsive suspension of restraint.

like. Don't force yourself to snack to get the food you like."

"Reassure yourself that you will be fed. Don't scare yourself by being casual about eating."

"Make meals worth waiting for."

Support Self-awareness and Choice

Support self-awareness; out of awareness comes choice. Help program participants become sensitive to their subjective experiences of initiating and finishing eating, and encourage them to make their own choices based on those subjective experiences. There are no rights or wrongs with respect to amounts eaten or with beginning or ending points of eating. The intent is not to replace one set of rules with another, but rather to enhance sensitivity to natural homeostatic mechanisms of food regulation.

In both individual and group settings, ask open-ended questions that support self-awareness about internal regulation and give openings for choice:

"How do you know when you need to eat?"

"What does it do to your eating when you get too hungry?"

"What makes you decide to stop eating?"

Asking, "How do you know when you need to eat?" for instance, gives openings for individuals to discuss personal responses to hunger, such as feeling cranky or stressed, their awareness of hunger and fullness, or whether or not they forget to eat. Such self-awareness gives openings for choice. How do they feel about treating themselves that way with food? Is it something they want to change—or not?

Give Strong Permission To Eat Enough

As indicated in the Table, eating to the point where appetite is satisfied is a more rewarding and therefore a more sustaining endpoint than trying to stop when hunger goes away but food still tastes good. Although eating

to the point of feeling stuffed is generally negative, eating to the point of being full can be a satisfying, if occasional, endpoint to eating. Messages that support eating enough include:

"Eat until your mouth is satisfied, as well as your stomach."

"Sometimes it feels good to eat until you are really full."

"To be sure that everyone gets enough to eat, make enough to have leftovers."

Identify and Discard Restrained Eating

Restrained eating is the chronic attempt to eat less and/or less-desirable food than wanted, generally in the pursuit of weight loss.¹² Because restraint with respect to both food selection and regulation of food intake are so integral to undergraduate and graduate nutrition curricula and nutrition policy, even the best-intentioned nutrition educator is likely to promote restrained eating in the form of portion sizes, numbers of servings, or fat restriction.

Because restrained eating takes so many forms in our culture, consider intent. If the intent is to eat less food or less-appealing food than desired in an attempt to manage weight, it is restrained eating.

Address Disinhibition

Disinhibition is periodic excessive and impulsive overeating with or without weight gain. By definition, disinhibition is a deliberate or unconscious throwing-away of controls that exists in tandem with current or threatened food insufficiency (food insecurity and/or restrained eating) or persists as the result of historical food insufficiency. The tendency to overeat at buffets, celebrations, or other occasions in the overall context of plentiful food may represent a habitual response to historical food insufficiency.

Although chronic disinhibition may respond only to treatment and is therefore outside the domain of the

nutrition educator, knowledgeable primary intervention can be helpful. To help neutralize disinhibition—or to avoid exacerbating it—neutralize food insufficiency. Teach internally regulated eating, and emphasize permission to choose rewarding food and eat it in satisfying amounts. Messages that help neutralize disinhibition emphasize permission and paying attention to eating, not eating less:

"Eat as much as you want. Just pay attention and enjoy it."

"You don't have to go out of control to eat a lot."

Address Weight Management

Striving for a particular weight outcome undermines eating competence. It mandates systematically ignoring and overruling internal regulators rather than depending on those cues as guides to food regulation. Offer to help, not with weight loss, but with decision making about weight management. Enter the subject via the individual's presenting concern about weight, and ask questions.

Has weight been stable? Initiating dieting can disrupt energy homeostasis and is not to be taken lightly.

Has weight followed a stepwise upward trajectory subsequent to repeated weight loss attempts? Another diet is highly unlikely to be successful and, in fact, risks making weight climb even higher.

Has weight been on an uninterrupted upward trajectory? It is likely that internal regulatory processes are impaired in some way.

Consider addressing these questions in a group setting. Group members discover that their lack of long-term success with weight reduction is a near-universal experience. As a consequence, they may be more forgiving of themselves and therefore more receptive to alternative approaches to managing eating and weight.

EATING CONTEXT

ecSatter emphasizes family meals. ecSatter attitudes and behaviors with

respect to context include having the skills and resources to procure and/or prepare rewarding and reasonably nutritious meals, provide predictable opportunities to eat, be comfortable enough with internal regulators to wait for meals, and manage time and self in order to suspend other activities and make time for eating.¹

Avoid turning the emphasis on family meals and strategies for meal planning into food rules. Remember that from the perspective of ecSatter, you are neither entitled nor obligated to tell people what they *should* do with their eating. Respect the individuals' life circumstances, honor their choices about feeding themselves, and emphasize eating food they find enjoyable. Wait to give advice until you are invited, then introduce the *possibilities* and the *choices*, don't lay out *shoulds* or *oughts*.

Stress Family Meals

Structure is as critical for singles and adults with no children as it is for parents with children. As Satter observed in *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, "you are a family when you take care of yourself."⁴ Meals reassure both adults and children that they will be fed. Going to the table hungry and eating until satisfied is key to food regulation. Meals give the repeated neutral exposure needed to learn to like new food. Meals give emotional and social reassurance of structure and reliable access to other people as well as offer a regular opportunity to tune in on oneself and the process of eating. Finally, meals help food keep its place as only one of life's great pleasures by limiting focus on food to specific times and places.

Remember Your Capabilities

The nutrition educator has mastered and is in a position to teach the many food management skills that allow having regular and reliable family meals, including:

- Familiarity with the food supply.
- Strategies for planning rewarding

- meals, including meals with other people.

- Capability with money management.

- Shopping and other food-acquisition skills.

- Sanitation and food-handling knowledge and practice.

- Food-preparation capability.

- Capability for orchestrating the serving and social context of meals.

Define Meals Achievably

Define meals in achievable ways; a meal is sitting down to eat facing each other¹³ and sharing the same food. A meal around a blanket on the floor or around a coffee table is still a meal. Encourage using food the family is currently eating, even if those food items are high in calories and low in nutrients.

Meals can be orchestrated around foods that family members eat in a catch-as-catch-can fashion by rounding up the family to eat their pizza, macaroni and cheese, or bologna sandwiches and Cheetos together. Resist imposing your own standards and values with respect to food selection and meal planning. Keep in mind that even the most nutritionally reprehensible meal is better than no meal at all. Endorse and dignify all approaches to food preparation, including take-out, mixes and meal kits, homestyle, gourmet, and "healthful."

Join With Individuals Where They Are

Give strategic food selection advice that supports current efforts with feeding self and family. People functioning at the apex of Satter's Food Hierarchy³ feel confident of getting enough to eat and may be interested in choosing food for instrumental reasons, such as eating—or avoiding—certain food to resist disease, prolong life, or enhance mental and emotional functioning. Those people are capable of prioritizing nutritional considerations when planning meals and may

be interested in information about specific nutrients.

On the other hand, people functioning at the foundation of the Hierarchy are preoccupied with getting enough to eat, not with seeking or avoiding specific nutrients. Address concerns about food security by supporting the natural tendency to preferentially select food that is relatively high in energy density—high-fat, high-sugar food—and point out how such food contributes to dietary quality. Encourage the use of fat in food preparation. Encourage liberal use of relatively inexpensive but filling food such as bread, rice, noodles, and potatoes, and endorse using butter, margarine, oils, and spreads to increase the caloric density of those food items as well as increase variety in the diet.

Teach Strategic Menu Planning

There are more possibilities with meal planning, but your participants don't have to go there. You are working toward their definition of meals, not yours. For instance, it can represent a major achievement to regularly orchestrate family meals by sharing an odd assortment of food while sitting on a blanket on the floor. On the other hand, such an achievement can stimulate curiosity and energy for greater achievement. That energy may take the direction of meal planning.

Once meals are firmly in place and if you are invited, ask, "What do you like to eat? What do you like to eat with it?" Emphasize the nutritional worth of preferred food items, offer one or fewer changes at any one time, and recommend adding food items rather than taking them away. To determine whether participants are telling you what they think you want to hear, ask questions, and have some fun: "If you make that change, will you still enjoy your meal?" "If you do that, will it wreck the dish?"

When participants are ready, offer meal-planning strategies to help them be successful with feeding themselves and their families. Feeding a family is

challenging. Children are inexperienced eaters, and grownups have their own food preferences. Trying to please all the eaters all of the time demoralizes the cook and undermines meals. Meal-planning strategies that help family members do well with meals are outlined in the chapter “Orchestrating Family Meals” in *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*.¹²

IMPLICATIONS

Begin by asking where your participants want help, and address those concerns. Many want help with maintaining family meals, generally within a tight budget. Help them find ways to address obstacles to family meals. Strategize how to plan rewarding meals, cook in a hurry, and stretch the budget to fill everyone up. Such discussions give openings for endorsing individuals’ food choices as well as for discussing internal regulators of hunger, appetite, and satiety. Those discussions, in turn, provide a foundation for addressing concerns about weight. Remember, eating competence supports weight stability.

In a classroom nutrition education setting, attitude is a good place to start with addressing ecSatter. Saying “eating is okay” begins to neutralize program participants’ fears that you will scold and shame. Be prepared to neutralize negative and puritanical messages about food selection, even if those messages come from participants.

Nutrition education materials from the ecSatter perspective emphasize food seeking, not food avoidance, and introduce possibilities with respect to food management. Examples of approaches to nutrition education

that integrate the concepts of ecSatter and discuss them in lay terms include *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*¹³ and the Web-based handout, “You and Your Eating.”¹⁴

Given its fundamental contradiction with the prevailing model, you may worry that ecSatter leaves you without a role to play in telling the public what to eat. In reality, ecSatter allows you to make comprehensive use of your professional skills and resources in working toward an achievable goal: empowering your participants to be positive and capable with eating. ecSatter offers a wide scope for nutrition education, offers you many tools for intervention, and lets you contribute on a satisfying and rewarding level.

You have authority, knowledge and expertise with food behavior, nutrition principles, food composition, physiology, cultural food-ways, economic realities, family and social systems, and strategies for coping. When you combine your professional expertise with your positive regard for the intrinsic worth of your clients, you are positioned to be a catalyst for productive change in eating attitudes and behaviors. Your regard allows you to engage others in their discovery of what holds true for them and sets them free to be creative and resourceful in finding their own solutions. It is positively thrilling and profoundly moving to participate in another person’s discovery of their own capabilities.

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