

The joy of eating

By Ellyn Satter, MS, RD, LCSW, BCD



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Eating is okay. Eating *enough* is okay. Eating what you *like* is okay. To be consistent and effective in feeding yourself and your family, build on *enjoyment*. Optimism, pleasure, and self trust are good motivators. Pessimism, avoidance, and self-doubt are poor motivators (1).

Today, eating is the enemy: *don't* eat so much, and *don't* eat the foods you like or you will get *fat* and then you will *die*. Only 40% of people admit they enjoy eating, down from 50% 20 years ago (2). Eating "enjoyably" comes loaded with guilt and fear; eating "properly" comes loaded with dreariness and control (3,4). Often we veer between the two like the *Parade* magazine survey respondents who say they eat a healthy mix of foods, then reward themselves with "pleasure foods." (5) Many resolve this discord by rejecting nutrition information (3,6).

We have trouble feeding ourselves and trouble feeding our children. The division of responsibility is the gold standard of feeding: Parents do the *what, when, and where* of feeding, and children do the *how much* and *whether* of eating. However, almost all parents of preschoolers limit menus to foods their children readily accept, then bribe and pressure them to eat (7). Despite the national hysteria about child overweight, over 90% of parents don't believe their children when they say they are full and encourage them to eat more (7,8). Pressure doesn't work: pressured children eat less well and behave badly at mealtime (9).

Teenagers are the canaries in the mine. In 12-year-olds, over half of girls and a quarter of boys diet, and dieters get fatter, not thinner (10). Dieting increases throughout adolescence and as teenagers move into young adulthood, with particularly sharp increases in extreme weight control measures such as vomiting and taking diet pills, laxatives and diuretics (11). It is little wonder that adolescents diet. Children are raised to ignore their sensations of hunger, appetite, and satiety. As they get older and take on grown-up ways, they see their parents dieting (up to three-quarters of adults regularly diet to lose weight) (12) and assume that is what grown-up eating is all about.

Counseling for Behavior Change

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Many of our clients come to us with laundry lists of "good foods" and "bad foods" and "should" and "should not" when it comes to eating. Helping our clients to develop a positive relationship with food is one of the greatest challenges for food and nutrition professionals. The following article by Ellyn Satter provides an evidence-based model for counseling our clients on developing eating competence.

It doesn't have to be this way. Consider The Satter Eating Competence Model (ecSatter), a clinically proven and evidence based way of feeling, thinking, and behaving with eating. I created and refined ecSatter in over 30 years' working with patients who had distorted eating attitudes and behaviors similar to the ones I described above (13) and it has been extensively tested (14-18). The fundamental principle of ecSatter is to trust rather than trying to hold back on your natural tendencies to provide yourself with ample and enjoyable food. To be competent with eating, emphasize *permission* and *discipline*:

- The permission to choose enjoyable food and eat it in satisfying amounts.
- The discipline to have regular and reliable meals and snacks and to pay attention while you eat (13).

You may worry that such permission will send your eating out of control. Not so. Being able to eat foods you like in satisfying amounts gives order and stability to eating. Foods that are no longer forbidden became ordinary foods that you can eat in ordinary ways. Disproportionately large portion sizes lose their appeal when you can look forward to getting enough to eat at regular meals and snacks. "Healthy" foods become enjoyable when you can eat them for pleasure rather than for obligation.

Will such giddy self-indulgence scuttle your attempts to be healthy? Entirely the opposite. Eating competent people do

better nutritionally, have healthier body weights (17,18), higher HDLs, and lower blood pressures (16,18). Remarkably, they are also healthier emotionally and socially. People with high eating competence feel more effective, are more self-aware and are more trusting and comfortable with themselves and with other people (17). That is not surprising. In raising children to be competent eaters, we raise them to be competent people. Eating competence relies on being trusting and comfortable with inner experience: the sensations of hunger, appetite and satiety.

It is time to unpack your bags from your guilt trip about eating. Instead, take an enjoyable and permanent vacation from shoulds and oughts by becoming Eating Competent.

Ellyn Satter is an internationally recognized authority on eating and feeding. Practical, warm and empowering, Satter integrates her 40 years of experience in helping adults be more positive, organized and nurturing in caring for themselves and their children. She founded Ellyn Satter Associates, which provides resources for professionals and the public in the area of eating and feeding. The business offers professional training, publishes training materials, teaching resources and books for parents and professionals, and generates magazine and journal articles. For more see www.ellynsatter.com.

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