

# Family Meals Focus

The Ellyn Satter Institute Newsletter

## Troubleshooting with sDOR

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While it seems simple, following the Satter Division of Responsibility in Feeding (sDOR) takes steady nerves, a leap of faith, having all the parts in place, and not adding anything that doesn't belong. Success or failure with sDOR can grow out of parents' Eating Competence (EC). Because EC parents depend on structure to feed themselves, it is a small step for them to include their child in their own regular meals and snacks. Because EC parents go by their own hunger and appetite to guide what and how much they eat, they are equipped to trust their child to do the same. In contrast, parents who have agendas for what and how much they eat and have difficulty accepting their own natural weight inclinations will likely have agendas for their child's natural eating and growth. Here are some signs that sDOR isn't being properly applied and is therefore not "working."

### Troubleshoot with sDOR

- *The child eats as much as s/he can, whenever s/he can.* Look for restriction. Consider whether the child needs an unusually large amount of food and parents have difficulty accepting that.
- *The child is uninterested in meals, resists attending, or conversely child prolongs mealtimes.* Look for mealtime pressure, direct or indirect restriction, PRN feeding that spoils the child's appetite,
- *The child shows no signs of sneaking up on unfamiliar food.* Look for pressure, lack of neutral exposure to unfamiliar food, unappealing (e.g. low-fat, unseasoned) food.
- *The child sneaks and hides food.* Look for restriction, mealtime pressure, food-portioning, unappealing food, strict avoidance of "forbidden food."
- *The child frequently or even continually says "I'm hungry," talks about, asks for food.* Look for unreliable meal/snack times, food restriction, feeding for emotional reasons. Consider whether the child's natural enthusiasm for food and eating has spooked parents into restricting.

### Getting structure in place takes time—and permission

From the perspective of the Satter Feeding Dynamics Model (fdSatter), family meals and sit-down snacks are most importantly about *structure*, not about the food. It can take months for parents to get structure in place, and nothing much will happen with the child's eating until they do. Help parents get the meal habit by neutralizing the attitude, "We don't sit down and eat together if it's fast food, like we would if it was home cooked." Instead, encourage them to eat what they typically eat, just organize it into meals and snacks. Administer this antidote to good-food-bad-food attitudes:

*Not all meals are perfect; eat together anyway*



### **Learning to be considerate without catering takes time**

Parents cater when they limit menus to foods children readily accept, short-order cook for them, or let them eat and drink on the run. Parents are considerate when they remember that children are inexperienced eaters who want to be successful with family meals. Considerate parents plan meals with a variety of food, include fat in cooking and serving, include one or two foods the child enjoys eating, regularly expose children to unfamiliar foods the parents, themselves, enjoy eating, and include high-fat, high-sugar foods (AKA junk food) often enough for the “treat” aspect to wear off.

### **Parents need time to stop pressuring and restricting**

Children’s negative eating attitudes or demeanor offer clues to poor feeding practices. Parents may have to video feeding times to catch their negative behaviors. They might dish up the child’s food, scoop and arrange it, make a child finish one food before having another, “forget” to offer a child certain foods, run out of favorite foods, give selective attention for eating (praise or give attention for eating, ignore for not-eating, or vice versa) ignore all but the child’s misbehavior, give the child the hairy eyeball for taking a second or third helping, or look worried when the child doesn’t eat much or eats a lot.

### **Children need time to adjust**

Once parents get structure in place and stop pressuring and restricting, children need time for their eating to become more extreme before it moderates. Extreme eating allows them to test the rules and instinctively find their feelings of hunger and fullness. Most importantly of all, children need time to trust that their parents really will feed them regularly and let them eat as much or as little as they want of food parents provide. Children need time, in short, to become competent with eating: To be relaxed and comfortable with family meals and snacks and to eat as much as they want of food they enjoy.

### **The take-home Message**

Do problem solving if a child continues to be negative, upset, and anxious about eating. Either structure is eroding or pressure and/or restriction, in all their sneaky, devious, insidious ways, are creeping in.