

Feeding development: the path to independence

By Dr Robert Needlman and Dr Laura Jana

When your infant is feeding, she's actually doing a lot more than just feeding. She's also learning about the development of social relationships (love and power relationships), thinking, exploring and increasing her sense of herself and general approach to the world. In other words, feeding and eating are rich topics, above and beyond their role in providing nutrition.

The overall direction of feeding development

As you mop up after your infant's spills for the hundredth or thousandth time, it might help to reflect on the overall meaning of feeding development.

In feeding, like other developmental areas, your infant moves from total dependence to independence. The drive to make this transition is hard-wired into her brain, but you also have a critical role to play. Independence in feeding means more than being able to get the food to her mouth and chew it. It means being able to make healthy choices, to eat for pleasure as well as for health, and to know when to stop. If you think about how much time and energy adults typically spend trying to control their own food intake, and if you think of the very high rates in our country of obesity and also eating disorders like [bulimia](#), then it is clear that developing healthy eating behaviours is no simple task.

The feeding relationship

The feeding relationship between a child and her mother or primary caregiver, is rich with psychological meaning.

In infancy, babies learn from being fed when they are hungry to trust that the world (and their mothers) will meet their needs. Having a sensitive feeder helps babies develop a general sense of optimism. Infant feeding is really a partnership, with each person playing a part to make it a success. Whether bottle or breast, feeding is a time for close emotional togetherness. Infants are biologically programmed to gaze into their mothers' eyes while they feed – and mothers and fathers, I believe, are naturally drawn to gaze back.

By nine months or so, the feeding relationship becomes more complicated. Now the baby wants to grab the spoon. She turns her head away, as if to say, 'No, it's my mouth, and I want to be in charge of it!' It takes tact, humour, and persistence to feed a toddler. Feeding is often a battleground for power struggles – who decides how much, how long at the table, what foods get put into the mouth?

By age six or seven, it's reasonable to expect children to have adopted the basic family attitudes towards eating, to have reasonably acceptable table manners, and to be able to stay at the table for short meals, joining in the conversation as appropriate. The rest of feeding development, one hopes, is simply refinement of this basic healthy eating behaviour.

Rated ★★☆☆ (14 ratings)

GLOSSARY

bulimia

An eating disorder characterised by bouts of compulsive overeating followed by self-induced vomiting.

More to explore

- ▶ You decide what, your child decides how much
- ▶ Toddlers Nutrition & Fitness
- ▶ Babies Nutrition

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Last reviewed
05-05-2006