

Optimizing Healthy Eating Habits in Early Childhood with Mindfulness

J. Joshua Byrd
Holly N. Hatton-Bowers
Donnia E. Behrends
Jaci J. Foged

Eating can be a joyful experience for both children and the adults caring for them. This publication provides information about mindful eating to support caregivers and children in developing healthy eating habits by practicing more awareness, curiosity, and gratitude when preparing and eating healthy food.

Mindful eating is the practice of paying attention to the food we eat without judgment and with curiosity (Nelson, 2017) and involves noticing how, when, where, and why one eats. When engaging in mindful eating, attention is given to the thoughts, sensations, and feelings while eating food. For example, when practicing mindful eating, one engages in a process of choosing to experience food one bite at a time. The food is experienced in the present moment, with intentionality, and with awareness brought to the food's taste, texture, and smell, and even the feeling eating the food elicits. As adults, the goal of engaging in mindful eating is to (1) recognize non-hunger triggers for eating, (2) meet non-hunger needs in more effective ways, (3) eat for satiety (fullness), and (4) choose food for nourishment. When adults participate in mindful eating trainings, they tend to have decreased food cravings, binge eating episodes, and improved dietary intake. For example, in one study of women, mindful eating was found to reduce the amount of high-calorie food items eaten and decrease caloric intake compared to women who did not receive any instructions on focusing their attention on mindful eating, such as eating slowly (Allirot et al., 2018).



Research suggests that mindful-eating interventions with elementary school children, teens, and adults can strengthen attention to hunger and fullness cues and reduce emotional eating, such as eating out of stress instead of eating because of hunger. Mindful eating is also related to enjoyment of preparing and eating food. These benefits of practicing mindful eating extend to improvements in self-management and self-acceptance. Mindfulness helps both youth and adults to move away from viewing food as “good” or “bad,” instead focusing on eating for nourishment, which can lead to a healthier relationship with food (Brewer et al., 2018).

Mindful eating and children. Children are naturally curious and exploratory with foods. They often share their reactions about the food they eat, and it can take parents or caregivers presenting a new food 10–15 times



before children will try it. Children who engage in mindful eating with their caregivers learn how to consume food in healthy ways and with healthy portions. When engaging in mindful eating, children are invited to bring curiosity and awareness to the foods they choose, prepare, and eat. Children learn that food is more than just filling you up. They practice engaging their senses to explore and savor food. This awareness and exploration can then lead to more enjoyment with food. Mindful eating also supports children listening to body cues and signals for fullness and hunger. For example, when teachers satisfy their hunger, they may say, “My stomach feels full. I’m going to stop eating.” This can help children learn to pay attention to their own cues to know when they should start and stop eating.

When practicing mindful eating with children, use a responsive approach. For older children, this means that the caregiver provides, and the child decides. Newborn babies rely solely on their caregiver to provide them with their meals, whereas children who are of an age to physically or verbally seek nourishment can provide caregivers with a signal such as reaching for food or asking directly for something to eat. Sometimes babies will cry for comfort rather than being hungry. Become mindful of their hunger cues so that you are feeding with responsiveness.

As adults, we can become reactive about children’s likes and dislikes for food. Children not only pay attention to what we say, but also notice our facial expressions and body language. In modeling the non-judgment part of mindful eating, it can be helpful for the adult caregiver to pause and not offer an immediate response. To foster curiosity, the adult can demonstrate bringing mindful attention to what they are eating. For example, caregivers can model by slowly putting the broccoli into their mouths and then chewing it gently and carefully. After caregivers engage in mindful eating, they can talk about what they are noticing and say something like, “This green broccoli is crunchy.”

If children do not want to eat the broccoli, caregivers can simply notice, and ask the children what they observe about the broccoli or other foods on their plate.

Some additional helpful tips in supporting children to engage in mindful eating include:

- Respecting children’s hunger and fullness cues. Children are typically born with the ability to regulate food intake to meet their energy needs. A helpful way to remember this is *the caregiver provides, and the child decides*.
- Eliminating distractions during mealtimes. Turn off the TV, Smartphones, and other devices and actively bring full attention to the eating experience. An undistracted meal is an ideal activity to help both caregivers and children observe eating practices and reflect on the experience as it is happening.
- Modeling enjoyment in eating and savoring the food.
- Sitting and eating with children during mealtimes.
- Using phrases that support children’s mindful eating of food, such as, “I have never eaten cauliflower, so I am looking forward to trying it”, or, “I really enjoy eating this food, so I am going to chew it slowly”.
- Utilizing the SAGE approach developed by Helen Maffini with MindBeEducation. SAGE—Savoring, Active Contribution, Gratitude, Education, <https://mindbe-education.com/mindful-eating-with-children/>, accessed May 2, 2019.

Savoring: In savoring, caregivers engage children in activities that bring their attention to pause, reflect, and be curious about the food they prepare and eat.

I'm starving and light headed, weak or dizzy.	Extremely hungry; my stomach feels very empty and is growling.	My stomach feels empty; there may be occasional growling.	Mildly hungry. I am starting to feel hungry.	Satiated, I don't feel hungry or full.	Mildly full. There is no discomfort.	I feel almost satisfied.	I feel satisfied and content.	I feel too full.	I ate way too much, and I don't feel so well.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Figure 1. Hunger Scale

- A caregiver can encourage savoring by offering different food items in a bowl during snack time (e.g., berries and nuts). Each child can use a clean spoon to pick one food item from the bag or bowl. Then the children are invited to pause, observe the chosen food item, smell the food, and then taste it slowly.
- Children can be invited to close their eyes and then are asked, “What does it taste like?”
- Offer the children a combination of foods and then ask, “What happens to the taste when they are mixed together?”

Active Contribution: When children grow and prepare their own food, they are more likely to try new foods. For example, young children can help by washing vegetables and fruit. Older children can help by mashing up food. You can ask children to notice the colors, textures, and aromas of food as they grow and prepare the food. This will help young children learn about the different ways that food changes as with different preparation. Children can be involved by setting the table, mixing the salad, or washing produce.

Gratitude: Cultivating young children’s appreciation for the food they eat is a wonderful mindfulness practice. While eating a snack or a meal, ask the children to think about all of the people and things that contributed to the food. Ask them to say a thankful message for all the people who helped to grow the food, as well as the sun, the water, and the soil. Say a special thank you to the farmers who helped grow the food and the people who prepared it. For example, you can say, “I am thankful for our dedicated cook for preparing our wonderful lunch.”

Education: Part of developing healthy eating practices is learning about the nutritional qualities of food and bringing more awareness, without judgement, to why we eat certain foods.

Conclusions. Mindful eating begins from within. These are some helpful questions to consider when mindfully eating:

- Ask yourself: Why am I eating? Am I hungry? Use the Hunger Scale as a way to assess your hunger before eating.

- What emotions are you noticing when you eat?
- Are you eating with intention, for nourishment, and for satiety?
- Are you eating for entertainment?
- Are you modeling mindful eating behaviors for children?

When eating with children, support them by asking questions about how they feel when they eat certain foods and to describe the texture, color, and taste of foods. It is important to respect the opinions of children to demonstrate your understanding of their perceptions, without judgement, so they feel comfortable sharing their experiences. This is also a good time to educate the youths about the foods they are eating so they can begin to learn how important good nutrition is for their bodies and minds.

For children, caregivers should practice mindfulness in choosing foods for snacks and meals. The USDA Choose MyPlate website has resources for providing balanced foods and ideas for engaging children in healthy eating practices. <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/eathealthy/start-simple-myplate>

Engage in mindful eating by using the Hunger Scale as shown in Figure 1 above. This helps you become more present and aware of your hunger cues.

Adapted from https://www.move.va.gov/docs/NewHandouts/Nutrition/N04_HungerAndFullness.pdf

References Cited

- Allirot X., Miragall, M., Perdices, I., Baños, R.M., Urdaneta, E., and Cebolla, A. (2018). Effects of a brief mindful eating induction on food choices and energy intake: External eating and mindfulness state as moderators. *Mindfulness*, 9, 750–760.
- Brewer, J.A., Ruf, A., Beccia, A.L., Essien, G.I., Finn, L.M., van Lutterveld, R., and Mason, A.E. (2018). Can mindfulness address maladaptive eating behaviors? Why traditional diet plans fail and how new mechanistic insights may lead to novel interventions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1,418.
- Nelson, J.B. (2017). Mindful eating: The art of presence while you eat. *Diabetes Spectrum*, 30, 171–174.

This publication has been peer reviewed.
Nebraska Extension publications are available online
at <http://extensionpubs.unl.edu/>.

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of
Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.
Nebraska Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University
of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

© 2019, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska on behalf of the Nebraska Extension. All
rights reserved.