

How your relationship with food affects your kids

It is important to feed mindfully and not just eat mindfully: lessons you'd want your child to learn about nutrition

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I have it on good authority that all adults were children first. And once upon a much earlier time, we were often patiently reminded that if we didn't finish our meals, we were wasting food. Many times, when we looked forlornly at an equally forlorn half-eaten chapatti staring back at us from our plate, we were gently told by the supervising adult that we were blessed to have food on the table. Meals in our house, for example, often started with a prayer thanking God for the food we were about to eat. In the stricter households of friends growing up, eagle eyes would be fixed on them lest they take flight mid-meal. Once upon a time, finishing all the food served was an integral part of disciplining children.

It is now another time. Or is it?

Your established relationship with food can potentially influence your child's relationship with it, especially if it is something you aren't aware of. If we were taught to clean our plates of food, we are more likely to instinctively do the same thing in turn as adults and pass on the torch, perpetuating the cycle. Of all the reasons to eat food, polishing your plate because that is how you were raised may be the most harmful one. This simple, innocuous rule may not only lead you to ignore your own satiety signals, but it may also lead to your children ignoring theirs. Or you ignoring theirs if they protest.

Every human being has their own unique biodiversity and it is supremely important to understand it. Each person's level of fullness, activity and attitude towards food differs, and while genes definitely have a role to play, so does the environment your child was raised in. An environment that pro-



Eat healthy: An environment that promotes forced feeding is more likely to produce an obese child ■ GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

motes overeating or forced feeding is more likely to produce an overweight or obese child. But I'm a realistic kinda gal and have reasonable expectations both from myself and others. I don't believe that behaviours, which have taken years to establish and have been influenced and reinforced by cultural norms and customs, will change overnight.

The next time you prepare food for your child, or are about to embark on feeding one, try and spend a minute on how you were raised, your culture, your

relationship towards food, or even your own body image. For example, parents who were once overweight children can be paranoid about calorie intake in their own young ones, since they don't want them to have experiences of being bullied or isolated.

So the next time you are furiously shaking a bottle of formula or pounding the mash, think about this:

1. What were your family's rules at the dinner table?
2. Were you made to clean your plate even if you weren't hungry?
3. How did your family or friends make you feel about your body?
4. How do you feel about your body now?
5. Was food used as a reward to make you do your homework or behave well in front of guests?
6. Was your family very 'food social'? Were there lots of guests, and activities which centred around the food cooked in your house?
7. How often did you celebrate with food?

8. Were you fed a lot? When were you allowed to feed yourself? At what age?

I'm not saying that any of the above is somehow wrong, but I am urging you to focus on what lessons you would like to take forward, and which you would like to leave in the past. If you find yourself nodding at even one of these, I would encourage you to feed mindfully, nourish mindfully and be an active participant in the feeding process. The questions above should help you answer the biggest question of them all: What lessons do you want your child to learn about nutrition?

Take time to think about the nutritional lessons at the dinner table and not just nutrition itself. Because with lifestyle diseases linked to overeating or poor dietary patterns – like diabetes, obesity and heart disease (India is the diabetes capital of the world) – you will realise that, with incorrect food habits, there is no happily ever after.

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THINK AND EAT

Intuitive eating is a nutrition philosophy that focuses on becoming more attuned to the body's natural hunger signals, helping you attain a healthy body weight and a good relationship with food.