

Responsive Feeding Practices During the Early Years

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Introduction: Responsive feeding refers to a reciprocal relationship between an infant or child and his or her caregiver that is characterized by the child communicating feelings of hunger and satiety, followed by a response from the caregiver. Healthy feeding behaviours, including responsive feeding practices, strengthen self-efficacy, self-regulation and emotional management throughout a child's development. Early years centres (EYCs) often follow healthy eating guidelines that encourage responsive feeding principles as part of promoting a healthy relationship with food; however, the extent to which these are adopted and understood is unclear.

Objective: The objective of this research was to understand responsive feeding practices in the home environment and in EYCs on Prince Edward Island (PEI).

Methods: A mixture of one-on-one interviews and focus groups were conducted with 27 participants including 13 EYC directors, 4 early childhood educators, 3 cooks, and 7 parents. Inductive thematic analysis of transcripts and field notes was conducted.

Results: Many EYCs provide an environment that encourages responsive feeding practices such as predictable meal routines, family-style meal service and caregiver engagement during meal times. However, factors related to cues to hunger and satiety, self-regulation, and positive role modelling were practiced less often and described as more challenging for both parents and EYCs.

Conclusions: Responsive feeding practices appear straightforward yet establishing and sustaining them can be difficult. Complex factors related to family, culture, social, and economics can undermine the confidence caregivers and parents have in maintaining these important feeding practices.

Significance to the Field of Dietetics: Despite the complex factors associated with responsive feeding practices, dietitians are well positioned to engage with early childhood educators and parents to promote a life-long healthy relationship with food.

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