TTAC

Perinatal and Early Childhood Mental Health Network

Training and Technical Assistance Center

"Tiny Voices, Big Messages: What "No" at the Table Really Means"

Marsha Dunn Klein, MEd. OTR/L, FAOTA

Who We Are

The New York City Perinatal and Early Childhood Mental Health Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC), is funded by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

TTAC is a partnership between the New York Center for Child Development (NYCCD) and the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research.

- **New York Center for Child Development** has been a major provider of early childhood mental health services in New York with expertise in informing policy and supporting the field of Early Childhood Mental Health through training and direct practice
- **NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research** houses the Community and Managed Care Technical Assistance Centers (CTAC & MCTAC), and the Center for Workforce Excellence (CWE). These TA centers offer clinic, business, and system transformation supports statewide to all behavioral healthcare providers across NYS.

  TTAC is tasked with building capacity and competencies of mental health professionals and early childhood professionals in family serving systems to identify and address the social-emotional needs of young children and their families.

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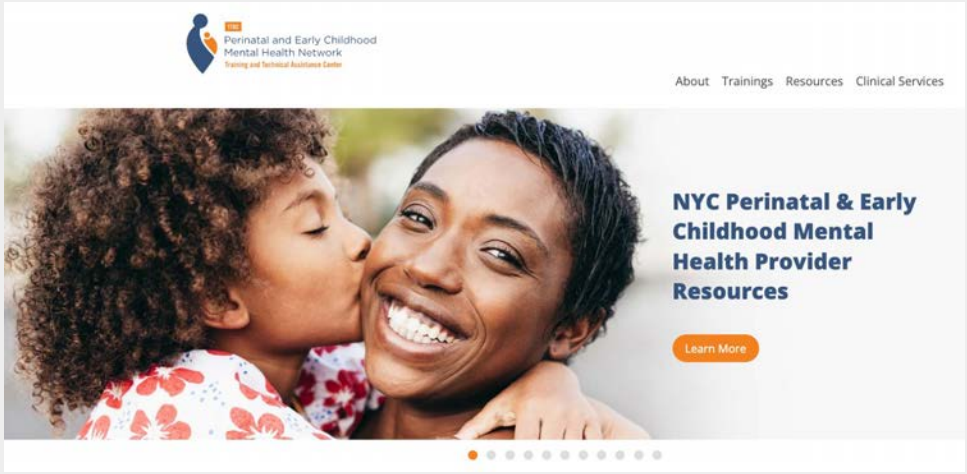

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A Variety of Features:

- View upcoming and archived content, trainings, and resources on the **Trainings page.**
  - Access videos, slides, and presenter information
- Contact the TTAC team by clicking on **Ask TTAC** and filling out our **Contact Us form**
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Tiny Voices, Big Messages: What “No” at the Table Really Means!

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Getting to know Marsha

- Occupational therapist
- Boston University and University of Arizona
- Over five decades of experience
- Clinician, Clinic owner,
- Author, Inventor
- Nestle's consultant
- Co-founder: Get Permission Institute

Objectives

By the end of this webinar, participants will be able to:

- Define the mealtime “No” as mealtime communication rather than refusal.
- List reasons a child might say “No” at the table.
- List tips for responding to the “No” of mealtimes.
- Describe when the repeated “no’s” of mealtime lead to a referral for specialized support.

RICE PUDDING

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
She's crying with all her might and main,
And she won't eat her dinner– rice pudding again–
What *is* the matter with Mary Jane?

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
I've promised her dolls and a daisy-chain
And a book about animals– all in vain–
What *is* the matter with Mary Jane?

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
She's perfectly well, and she hasn't a pain;
But, look at her, now she's beginning again!–
What *is* the matter with Mary Jane?

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
I've promised her sweets and a ride in the train,
And I've begged her to stop for a bit and explain–
What *is* the matter with Mary Jane?

What is the matter with Mary Jane?
She's perfectly well and she hasn't a pain,
And it's lovely rice pudding for dinner again!–
What *is* the matter with Mary Jane?

Rice Pudding

A.A. Milne (1924)

Who can identify with this poem?

- Can we imagine Mary Jane's eating challenges through the lens that "she is **communicating**, doing the **best she can**?"
- Can we respect the "no" and be **curious** why she doesn't want or like rice pudding?
- For this talk, can we put ourselves in Mary Jane's shoes?

Mary Jane does not like or want rice pudding. "No!"

Let’s be curious together.
Why might Mary Jane say “NO” to Rice Pudding?

Maybe she just does not like that food?
Maybe she has never seen that food, it's new.

Certainly, she may be a toddler and is practicing her independence, her “No” just because she can.

Why Toddler “No?”

- Assertion of independence
- A very typical developmental behavior. Your food loving infant can so quickly turn into a confusing ”NO” toddler.
- It is busy time for brains and bodies. Toddlers are wired to move and explore. Sitting still for a meal could be a challenge.
- Toddlers may be less hungry than we expect. Their appetites fluctuate naturally.
- Grazing, snacking, especially milk and sugary drinks between meals can dampen appetite.

Toddler reaction can be surprising to grownups

- As they defend their interests and preferences
- As they develop their individuation (me vs. you) and autonomy, they may be testing boundaries by saying “No”, insistent on doing things their way, and expressing BIG feelings, or even tantrums as they assert themselves.
- As they move from a child who previously ate many different foods to suddenly becoming more selective or resistant to one loved foods.
- As parents learn these actions are not merely acts of defiance, but expressions of the child’s developing independence and autonomy and their own attempts to exert control over their bodies and their world.
- We need to learn to support toddler eating…tips later

“When you hear hoofbeats, look for a horse, not a zebra.”.

“When you encounter something that seems unusual, consider the most common explanation first.”

Dr Theodore Woodward , 1962

Tips for a general toddler “No”

- “No” is a practice for autonomy
- Sometimes “no” is not literal…Maybe “I am not ready”, “I am overwhelmed”, “Hang on, give me a moment"
- Do not push into the “no” as it becomes pressure
- Keep language neutral
- Small tastes of new on the plate invites exploration
- Choices within structure
- Honor fullness and preference cues
- There will be another meal.

When the “usual supports” do not seem to be changing the experience

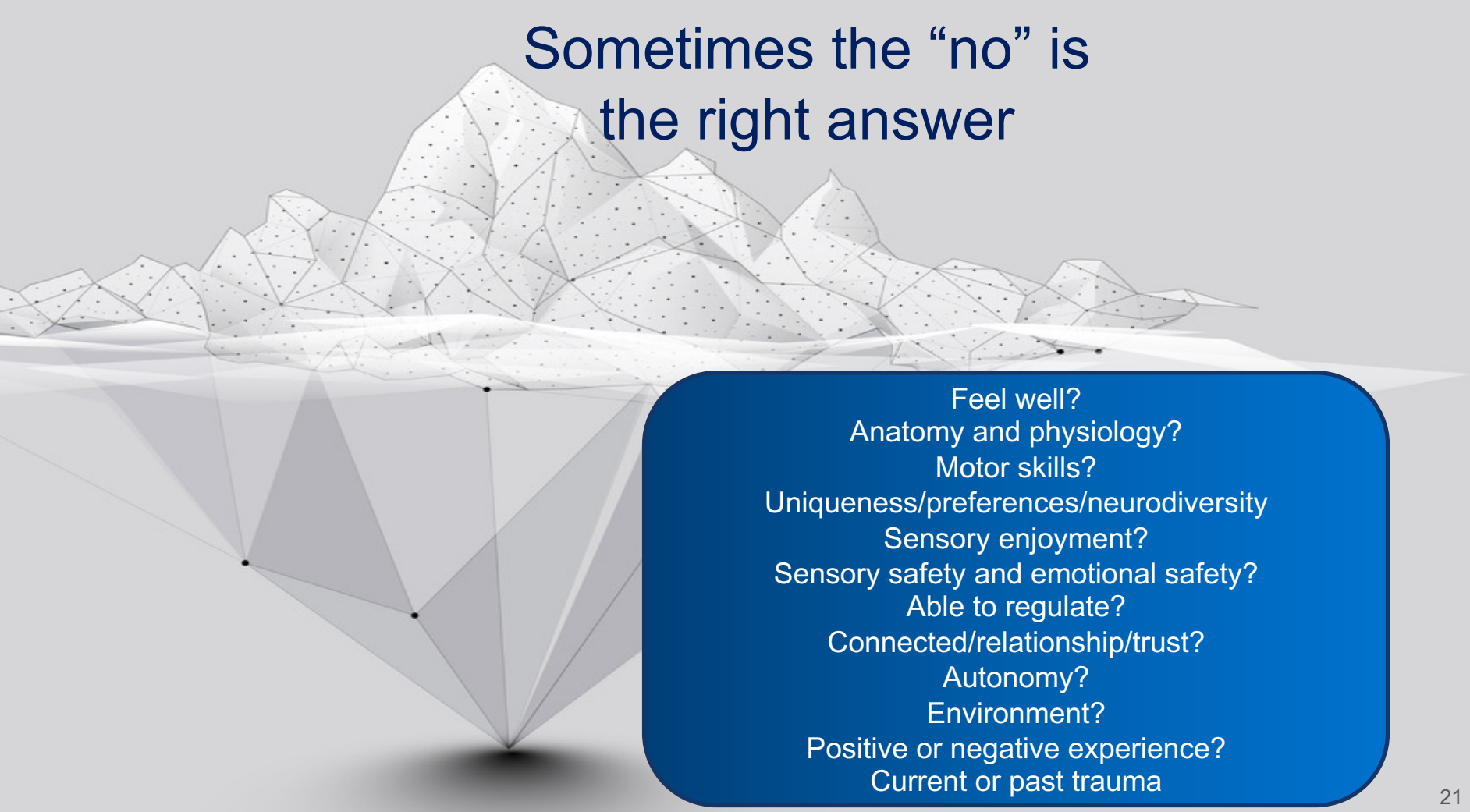
- Regular BIG persistent “no’s” that become worrisome
- Diet limiting
- Mealtime distress, dysregulation
- Slowed skill advancement
- Child does not want to come to the table, at all
- Power struggles and PRESSURE can sneak in
- Be curious

But sometimes it is a zebra.
What is the child communicating?
Each child is unique.
Each moment is unique.
We need to be curious!

Sometimes the “no” is just the tip of the iceberg

Feel well?
Anatomy and physiology?
Motor skills?
Uniqueness/preferences/neurodiversity
Sensory enjoyment?
Sensory safety and emotional safety?
Able to regulate?
Connected/relationship/trust?
Autonomy?
Environment?
Positive or negative experience?
Current or past trauma

Sometimes the “no” is the right answer



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Positive or negative experience?
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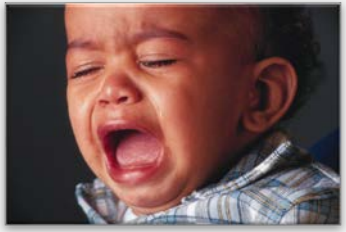
No, a “communication” or a “refusal”?

- **Communication,** not ”behavior problem”
- When we think of the child as **communicating** it invites us to be curious, to wonder what is going on with the child and how can we help.
- “The ‘No’s” can and do accelerate if not heard.
- When “No” is denied, it will interfere with self-regulation.







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Start with curiosity not compliance

"We keep trying to change people's behaviours without a full understanding of how and why those behaviours arise."

Gabor Mate

Having your opinions heard is important!?

- “No” is a way to share your opinion.
- Grown ups need to learn to read the child

Be curious! Does the child feel well?

- **Sometimes children just do not feel well**
  - Teething?
  - Tired?
  - Constipation?
  - Allergies?
  - Acute or chronic illness?
  - GI discomfort: reflux? constipation? pain?

Be curious!
Is there mealtime enjoyment and success?

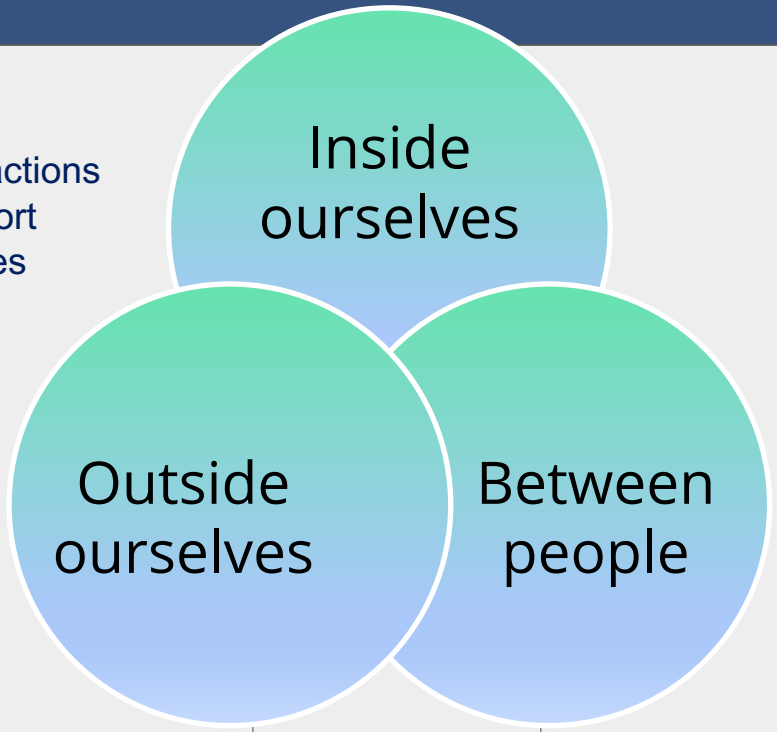
- **Does the environment support the child's mealtime. enjoyment and success?**
  - Does the child need support in regulation?
  - Reduce distractions?
  - A trusted grown up?
  - Postural support,
  - Sensory supports (SPIO or weight vest?)
  - Environmental changes (noise, smells, sensory overload)
  - Predictability
  - Reduce pressure

Be curious! Is there felt safety?

What can make a child **not** feel safe at a meal?

Safety

Interoception
Danger Danger
Our sensory reactions
Pain or discomfort
Past Experiences



Environment
Predictability?
Structure or not?
Overwhelm?

Relationships Connection
Does the person understand me?
Support me?
KNOW me?

Dana,2018

Be curious: Safety at the mealtime?

- Felt Safety is personal
  - To help a child feel safe at mealtimes, we must prioritize emotional and sensory safety before any expectations around eating.
  - Felt safety is the foundation for connection, regulation, and eventual feeding progress.
  - Child must trust the grown ups. Connection supports safety. (Purvis, 2007)
  - Trust there will be enough food to “fuel up.”
  - Be secure in the knowing that eating the food will feel good, be a good experience.
  - Be food secure. Think about food insecurity.

Food insecurity for children

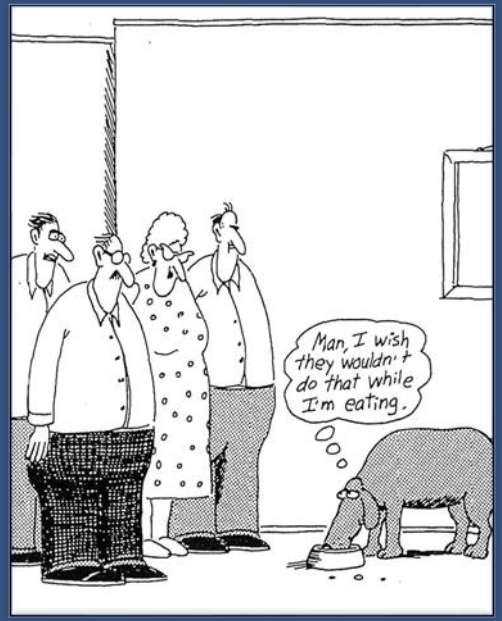
- Story of child sitting there and then bed at 10 and then hoarding
- Kofi Essel,MD, Food Insecurity
- Essel, K. (2022). The First 1000 Days- A Missed Opportunity for Pediatricians. Am J Pubic Health. Oct;112(S8);S757-759.

Be curious! Is there pressure?

What does/can pressure look like at a meal?

Pressure

The use of persuasion, influence, or intimidation to make someone do something. An attempt to persuade or coerce (someone) into doing something.



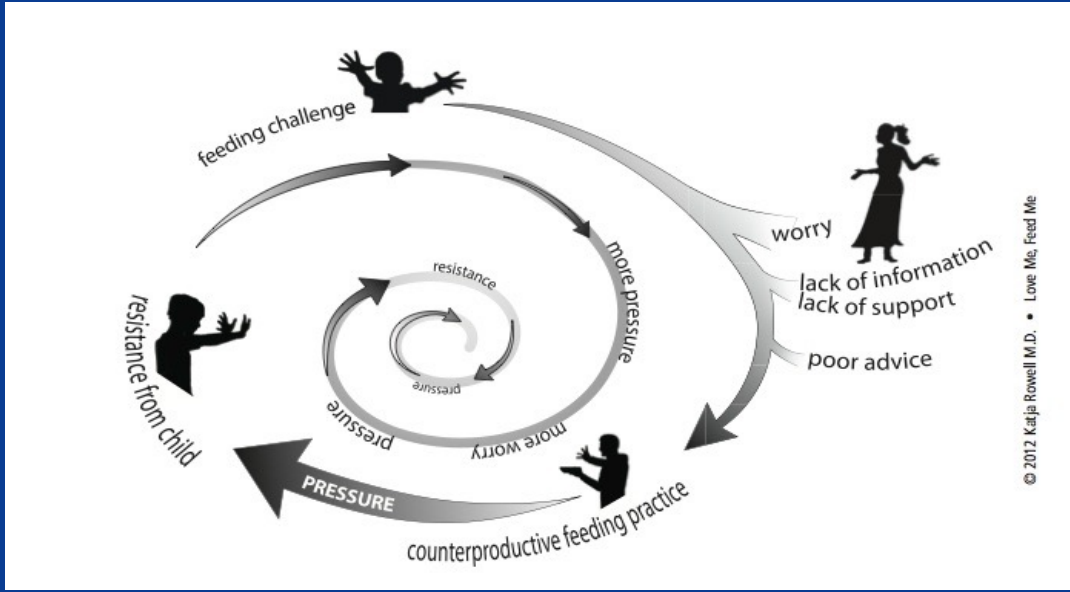
Why Parents Pressure

Guilt: Feeling internal pressure to have the child eat a healthier diet: From diet culture, other family members or friends

Parents' Own Food History: They were fed in a directive manner as children

Culture of Origin: Some cultures have more directive feeding practices

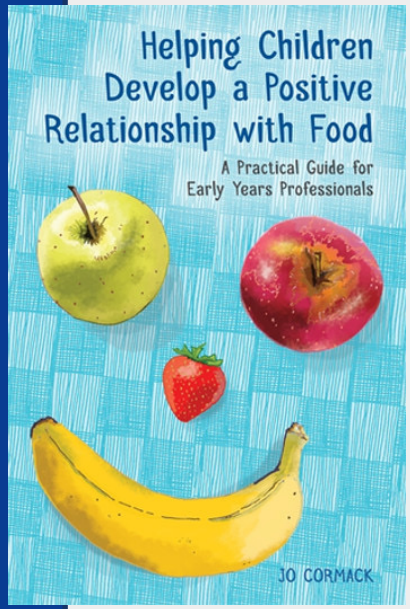
The Worry Cycle



Rowell, 2012

"With expectations, even hidden ones, comes pressure and pressure is the enemy of a relaxed and responsive approach to feeding children."

Jo Cormack

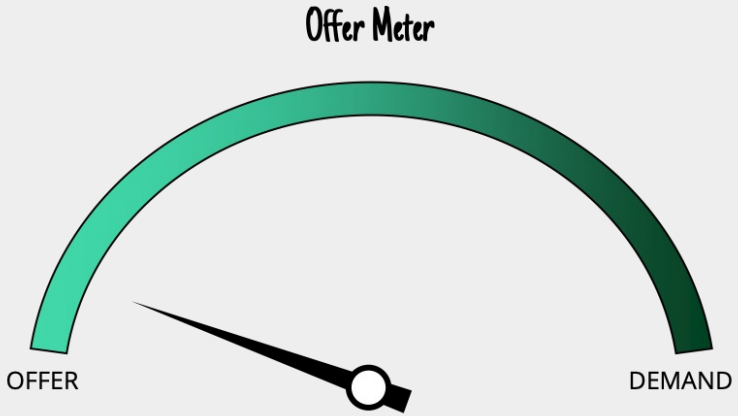


Rowell,2012

Pressure influences safety and regulation

- Why pressure?
- What might pressure look like?
- Pressure can be obvious
- Pressure can be subtle
- Pressure is personal
- How do children respond to pressure? Resistance
- Pressure changes the physiology of eating
- Pressure DOES NOT HELP the GI system function, or mealtime enjoyment in the long run

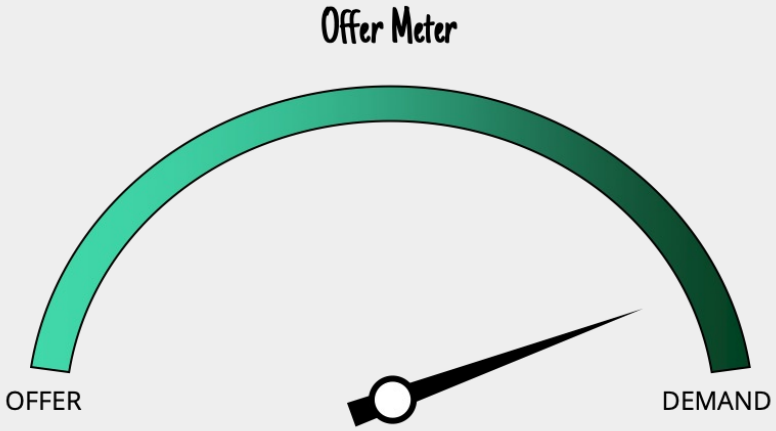
Internal Motivation



Pressure changes motivation from internal to external

- Internal motivation comes from within the child driven by hunger, curiosity, discovery, enjoyment, personal satisfaction.
- Attending to internal motivation allows children to eat when hungry and stop when full and learn to listen to own body messages.

External motivation



- **External motivation**-Motivation comes form outside the child such as opinion of others, outside rewards, pressure, praise, stickers, bribes, charts
- Adult pressure for eating can tell the child to NOT listen to their body cues (their interoception) or to **mask** what they are truly feeling.

Reduce pressure

- Know grown up roles and stop the “hover”
- Adults provide, children decide (AAP)
- Offer and provide *opportunities*, without demands or requirement
- Remember an offer is a CHOICE.
- Rethink *exposures*

Reduce pressure

- Honor the “no”
- Respect the differences and unique preferences
- Acknowledge the differences and validate them without judgement

Resources: Birch et al,1997; Birch & Fisher, 1997; Birch, 1999; Jansen et al, 2017; Harris & Booth,1992; Powell, 2011; Carper et al, 2000; Carruth, 1998; Kerzner, 2015, Galloway, 2006; Batsell, 2002; Lumeng , 2018

Motivation influences choices

- Motivation for eating works best if it is **internal or intrinsic** motivation.
- Attending to internal motivation allows children to eat when hungry and stop when full and learn to listen to own body messages.
- Adult pressure to eat, rewards or bribes for eating can tell the child to NOT listen to their body cues, or to mask what they are truly feeling. That motivation is external. (Parizel, 2017; Patal, et al, 2008)

Bobby's new head-mounted airplane hangar and runway made dinnertime much more fun.
CartoonStock.com

Be curious!Does the child have autonomy?

Role confusion?

Having your opinions heard is important!?

- Independence- Ability to function without relying on others
  - Ex. Using fingers, spoons, straws, serving self, wiping hands independently
- Autonomy- Capacity to making informed self-directed decisions free of coercion
  - Ex. Choosing what to eat, deciding how much
- Agency- The ability to act intentionally and influence outcomes
  - Saying “I like this, I do not like that,” contributing to the mealtime process , “No, I need a fork” . Saying “NO NOT TODAY”. Problem solving, asking for help when stuck

Be curious! Does sensory work?

- Food IS sensory (It has a look, smell, texture, sound & taste)
- Sensory preferences are unique.
- Does this food on this day work for that child?
- Sensory enjoyment can influence safety
- We do not all eat or enjoy the same foods
- Preferences are influenced by experiences as well as personal sensory profile (Nichlaus, 2016)
- Not everyone needs to eat or like everything
- The experience changes the mealtime

Be curious! Do the motor skills work?

Does the have the skills and competence

- Competence comes with practice
- Competence comes from strengths-based activities
- Competence comes with autonomy and self-motivated learning.
- Does the child just want to drink?
- Does the child just want to eat purees, pouches?
- Is there persistent gagging, choking, vomiting?
- Does the child need utensil support, postural support, skill training, food texture changes?

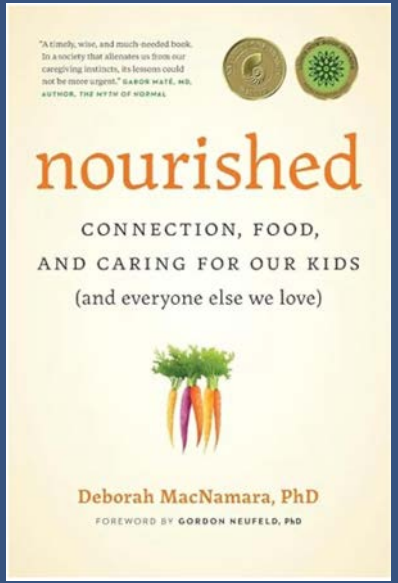
We do not want children to feel as though they are constantly disappointing their grown ups around eating with constant pressure to eat more, less or differently.

"Just because you eat doesn't mean you are nourished."

Deborah MacNamera

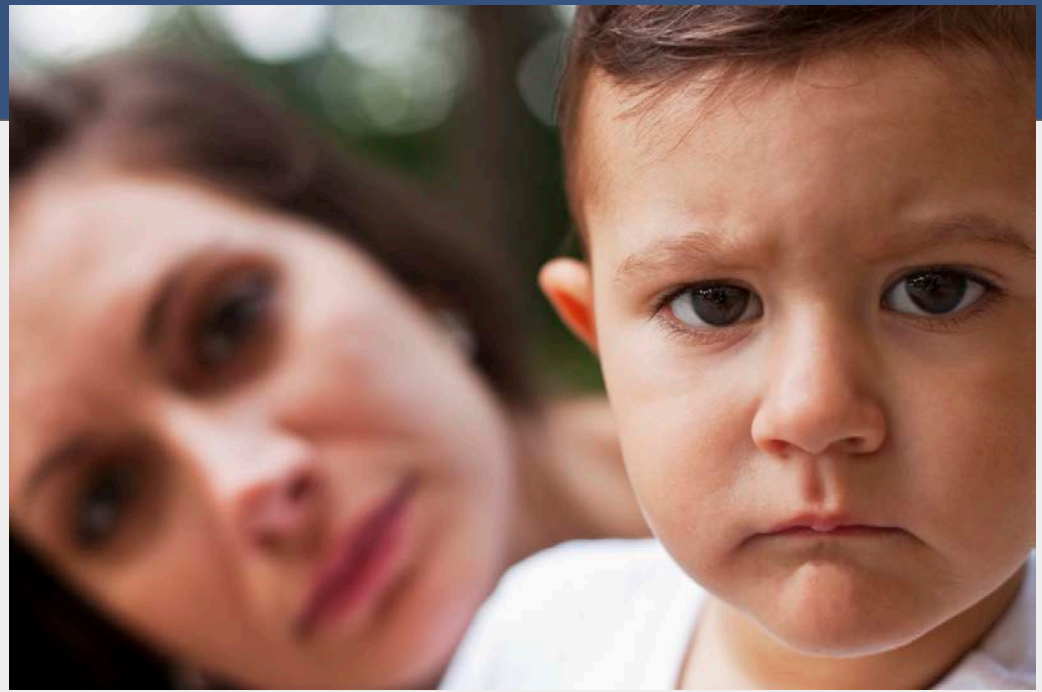
““Food is only one part of nourishment, but it has consumed our focus and eclipsed something far more critical for thriving-connection.”

Deborah MacNamera



What can we do?

1. Be curious



2. Everyone is doing the best they can

Find empathy

3.Support safety

- Relationship matters
- With a trusted connected other
- Sensory safety
- Emotional safety
- A comfortable environment for learning including posture
- Support regulation and focus so child is in “Window of Tolerance” and ready to learn. (Porges 2017; Dana, 2018)
- “Show Up “ for the child, be empathic. (Siegel & Bryson, 2020)

And Support the relationship

- Connection is foundational for safety (MacNamera, 2023)
- A positive relationship is foundational for safety (Satter, 1990)
- Trust is foundational for safety

4. Offer without pressure

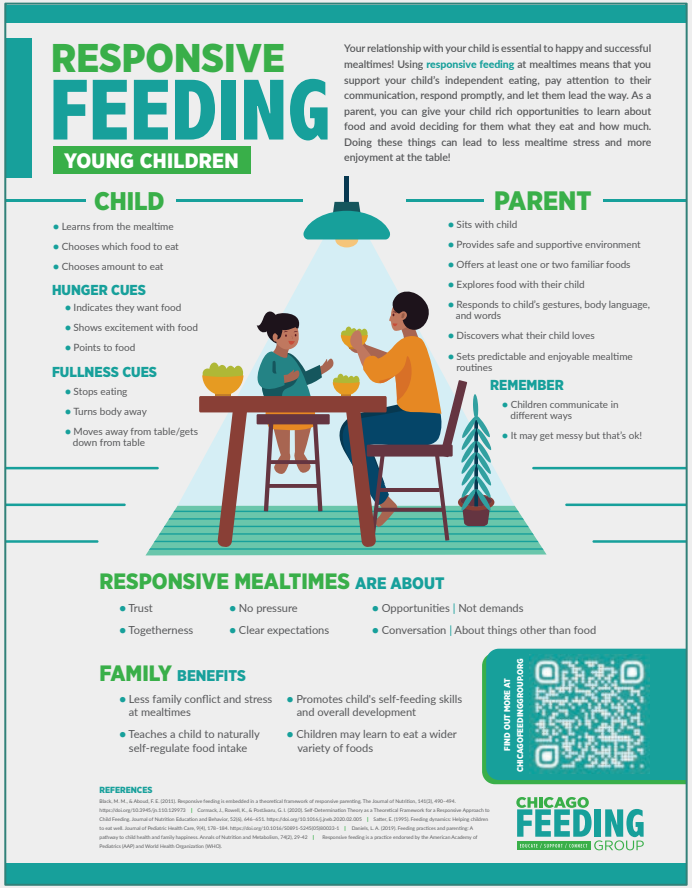
- Provide “opportunities”
- Offers are a **choice**
  “No” is one option
- Consider opportunities vs “exposures”

Offer and adjust

- An opportunity is an offer.
- An offer is not a demand.
- There is choice in the offer.
- Children can say “no”.
- We can be curious about their response.
- We can pivot or adjust as needed.
- Allows child to find what they enjoy and go at their own pace.
- We are partners, discovering the enjoyment together.
- Mealtime compliance can take away choice.

5. Be responsive

- Responsive feeding is endorsed by agencies all over the world including AAP, WHO, UNICEF, PAHO.
- It is based on reading a child's cues in a give and take communication that is responsive and adjusts to the needs of the child.
- Foundational values include the importance of relationship, autonomy, motivation, competence, and holism. (Rowell, 2020; Black & Aboud, 2011)
- Responsive does NOT mean permissive.



Chicago Feeding Group

www.chicagofeedinggroup.com

Also available in Spanish, Greek, Polish, French

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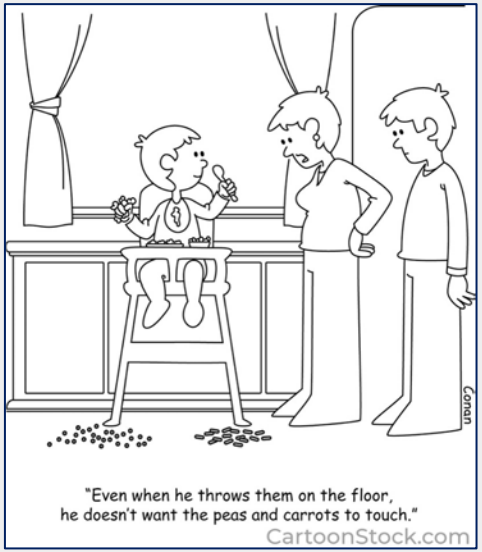
6. Support this unique child in this moment

- Essentially, we are all “picky”. We “pick” what we want to eat.
- We each have unique eating styles and preferences influenced by our unique sensory profile and our experiences.
- Some children are adventurous.
- Some children are cautious or even selective.
- And our preferences may fluctuate depending on so many factors.
- Neurodiversity affirming support is important.

(Hunani : www.RDsforneurodiversity.com)



7. Role model and rehearse

- Rehearsals are opportunities to ”meet” new foods without ANY pressure to eat or TRY them. Be authentic
- Provide experiences to explore foods. Exploration expands the brains capacity for later learning
- “Do as I do” is much more powerful that “do as I say”. (Birch, 2007)

8. Support Autonomy

- Provide lots of choices (not just in menu, but serving or assisting self, cups, plates, straws napkins. (Choice big and little)
- Plating and serving own foods
- Autonomy supports internal motivation
- Novelty can be motivating. It can invite the child into the interaction.

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9. Be sure there is enough to “fuel up”

- Provide Choices including foods the child knows
- Plating and serving own foods

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A word about the importance of being the “menu deciders”. (My house on Sunday nights)

Melissa Clark: Pressure Cooker, On Respecting Kids’ Tastes and the Ultimate Lentil Soup
https://www.pressurecooker.fm/episodes/80s87v5tzpj2wgtz7q0slk4bkvjx0e

10. Help make new positive mealtimes

- Make it enjoyable
- Supports relationship and connection
- Neuroplasticity of the brain
- Can mediate past mealtime trauma

And make referrals as needed

- A feeding therapy referral is appropriate when there are persistent, stressful unsafe difficulties with eating, drinking, or oral motor skills that go beyond typical picky or selectiveness in toddler eating.
- Medical concerns? Coughing, choking, vomiting, weight issues
- Extreme distress, duress at the meal
- Difficulty focusing on or being regulated at a meal even with supports
- Extreme selectivity in diet (narrow diet)
- Difficult with mealtime change
- Difficulty transitioning to meals

Related topics at Get Permission institute

- “Learning Through Opportunity” Master Course Feeding
https://course.getpermissioninstitute.com/courses/learning-through-opportunity-feeding-infancy-toddler-on-demand
- Free professional courses
- https://course.getpermissioninstitute.com/courses/dear-professional-we-have-your-back-on-demand
- Free parent courses. Watch for our **Pressure** course: Live Nov 12 and on demand at GPI soon: “Power Struggles to Peaceful Plates” and Dear Parent.

- “Responsive Feeding: Review of Evidence”
https://course.getpermissioninstitute.com/courses/responsive-feeding-review-of-the-evidence-and-application-to-therapy-on-demand

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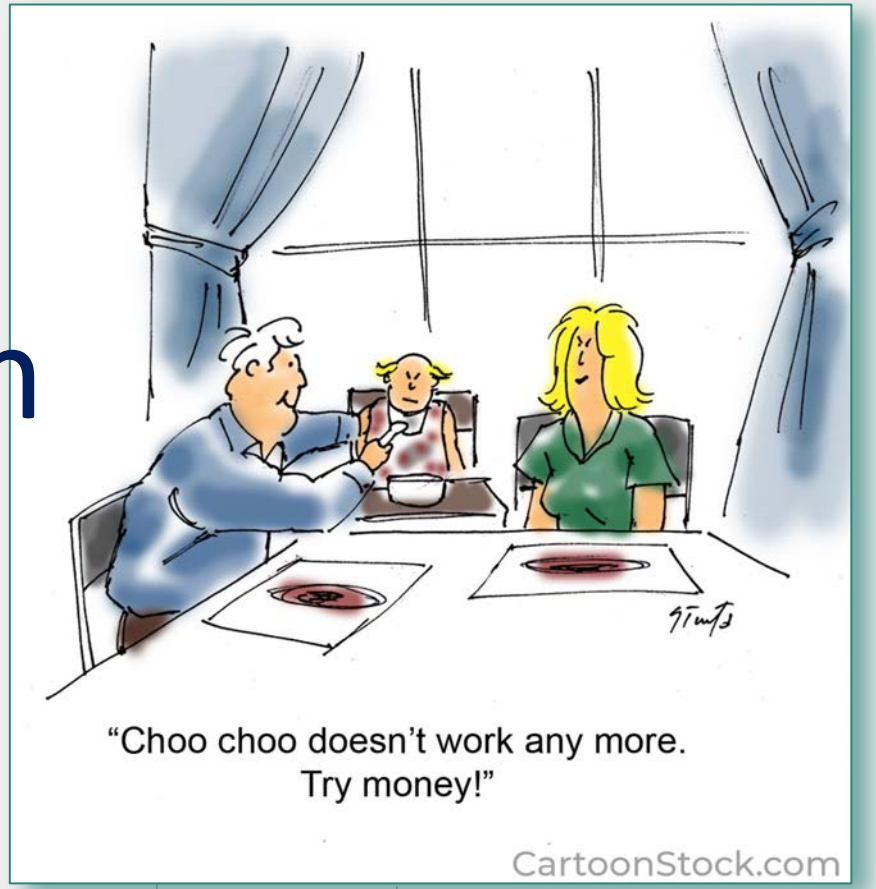

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