

# Nutrition News

Department of Human Nutrition



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## What is “Eating Competence”?

No, it’s not the ability to properly hold a knife and fork; or to know which spoon to use; or to know how to fold a napkin into a swan.

People who are competent eaters have positive attitudes about eating. They enjoy food. They are confident that they will have enough food to eat and they trust their bodies’ internal regulators to signal when they are hungry and when they are full. Children move toward eating competence as they learn to acknowledge their own internal cues. Development of eating competence – or the lack of – begins in infancy and continues through life.

The September/October 2007 Supplement to the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* focused on the Ellyn Satter Eating Competence Model. Research published in that issue showed that people who have high eating competence are more likely to have healthy body weights, have higher HDLs and lower blood pressures, and have other indicators of

better nutritional health.

To become more of a competent eater, take the time to eat and enjoy your food. Stay focused on what you’re eating. That is, don’t mindlessly eat in front of the television or while reading the newspaper. Provide meals and snacks at regular times each day – your body and likewise, your family, will learn to trust that the next opportunity to eat will come in time to prevent worry (stress) about food’s availability. Stress can cause overeating and other non-competent eating tendencies.

If you are a competent eater, you have a positive attitude about eating and food. Food is not punishment or reward. It’s to be enjoyed at meal and snack time. To help develop eating competence, plan for variety in the foods you eat – try some new foods, or serve foods in a different way.

Pay attention to when you are hungry and when you are full. Eat until you are satisfied and then stop eating. If your meals and snacks are at regular times

each day, you know you’ll get something else to eat at the next meal or snack time.

I remember years ago reading an article by humorist Erma Bombeck. She mentioned having some of her friends over for dinner. During the meal, she criticized Fred’s table manners. She told him he had to eat something even though he didn’t like it. She asked him very pointed questions about how his day had gone, and berated him on how he had messed up something at work. As expected, it was not a very pleasant evening, and Fred was not likely to show up for dinner at her house again. Then she commented that this is the way we sometimes treat our own families at dinnertime. We sometimes make meal times not very enjoyable. We bribe or cajole our families to eat food they don’t like or don’t want. We have rules about cleaning your plate, or tasting everything before you can eat dessert. This is definitely *not* the way to develop eating competence!

Sources: J Nutr Educ Behav Suppl. 2007:39. Family Meals Focus E-Newsletter <http://www.ellynsatter.com>  
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Karen Fitzgerald, MS, RD, LD is a registered and licensed dietitian. She is the Coordinator of the Kansas Nutrition Network (KNN), a program of K-State Research and Extension that works to improve the health of low income Kansans. KNN is funded through USDA, public non-federal in-kind donations, and grants.

For more information about healthy eating, contact your local extension office.

The Food Assistance Program can help people of all ages with low income buy nutritious foods for a better diet.

To find out more, call toll-free 1-888-369-4777.

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