Children develop eating competence step-by-step throughout the growing-up years when they are fed according to a stage-appropriate division of responsibility. At every stage, parents take leadership with feeding and let the child be self-directed with eating.

**The division of responsibility for infants:**
- The parent is responsible for *what*.
- The child is responsible for *how much* (and everything else).

Parents choose breast- or formula-feeding, help the infant be calm and organized, then feed smoothly, paying attention to information coming from the baby about timing, tempo, frequency, and amounts.

**The division of responsibility for older babies making the transition to family food**
- The parent is still responsible for *what*, and is becoming responsible for *when* and *where* the child is fed.
- The child is *still* and *always* responsible for *how much* and *whether to* eat the foods offered by the parent.

Based on *what* the child can *do*, not on how *old* s/he is, parents guide the child’s transition from nipple feeding through semi-solids, then thick-and-lumpy food, to finger food at family meals.

**The division of responsibility for toddlers through adolescents**
- The parent is responsible for *what*, *when*, *where*.
- The child is responsible for *how much* and *whether*.

Fundamental to parents’ jobs is trusting children to decide *how much* and *whether* to eat. If parents do their jobs with *feeding*, children do their jobs with *eating*:

**Parents’ feeding jobs:**
- Choose and prepare the food
- Provide regular meals and snacks
- Make eating times pleasant
- Show children what they have to learn about food and mealtime behavior
- Be considerate of children’s food inexperience without catering to likes and dislikes
- Not let children have food or beverages (except for water) between meal and snack times
- Let children grow up to get bodies that are right for them

**Children’s eating jobs:**
- Children will eat
- They will eat the amount they need
- They will learn to eat the food their parents eat
- They will grow predictably
- They will learn to behave well at mealtime

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# DEVELOPMENTAL PRINCIPLES GUIDING FEEDING PRACTICES

At all ages, developmentally appropriate feeding depends on a division of responsibility. The child must be allowed and encouraged to determine what and how much to eat from what the parent provides.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s age, developmental tasks</th>
<th>Parents’ jobs in optimum feeding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newborn 0-3 months</strong>&lt;br&gt;Homeostasis&lt;br&gt;Remain calm and alert&lt;br&gt;Begin to be interested&lt;br&gt;Filter stimuli&lt;br&gt;Regulate sleep states&lt;br&gt;Begin to explore: Sight, touch, taste, smell</td>
<td><strong>Core tasks:</strong> Observe and understand the infant. Respond to infant cues.&lt;br&gt;Understand and respect sleep rhythms&lt;br&gt;Learn to read and respond to baby’s cues&lt;br&gt;Time care and feeding for quiet alert state&lt;br&gt;Understand baby’s own temperament&lt;br&gt;Be willing and able to feed on demand</td>
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<td><strong>Infant 2-6 months Attachment</strong>&lt;br&gt;Learn to love&lt;br&gt;Coordinate reflexes&lt;br&gt;Move and communicate deliberately</td>
<td><strong>Core task:</strong> Develop and maintain emotional give and take.&lt;br&gt;Help baby be calm and alert during feeding&lt;br&gt;Feed baby when she wants to eat&lt;br&gt;Talk and smile; talk and smile back&lt;br&gt;Understand baby’s signs and do what baby wants</td>
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<td><strong>Older baby 5-9 months</strong>&lt;br&gt;Attachment/separation individuation&lt;br&gt;Consolidating attachment&lt;br&gt;Beginning to experience self as separate&lt;br&gt;Begin taking an interest in what lies beyond the parent</td>
<td><strong>Core task:</strong> Understand and support the child’s interest in things&lt;br&gt;Understand baby’s development: eating skills and body control&lt;br&gt;Start solids based on what baby can do, not how old she is&lt;br&gt;Feed the way baby wants to eat: fast or slow, little or much, brave or cautious&lt;br&gt;Give baby many chances to like new food&lt;br&gt;Have family meals the child is working toward joining</td>
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<td><strong>Almost-toddler 7-15 months</strong>&lt;br&gt;Separation individuation&lt;br&gt;Begin to experience self as separate&lt;br&gt;Cares deeply about doing it him- or herself</td>
<td><strong>Core task:</strong> Recognize and support the child’s need to do it herself.&lt;br&gt;Include the child at family meals&lt;br&gt;Choose “safe” food to pick up, chew and swallow&lt;br&gt;Give many chances to experiment with new food and learn to like it&lt;br&gt;Time snacks so child can be hungry but not too hungry at mealtime&lt;br&gt;Give attention but not all the attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Toddler 11-36 months</strong>&lt;br&gt;Separation individuation&lt;br&gt;Develops perception of self as “separate”&lt;br&gt;Grapples with balancing connection &amp; autonomy&lt;br&gt;Develops concept of control&lt;br&gt;Somatopsychological differentiation (distinguishing feelings from sensations)&lt;br&gt;Organizes behavior into sequences</td>
<td><strong>Core task:</strong> Teach child he or she is part of the family&lt;br&gt;Have family meals; scheduled snacks&lt;br&gt;Not let the child graze&lt;br&gt;Eat with the child&lt;br&gt;Teach the child to behave at mealtimes&lt;br&gt;Not short order cook&lt;br&gt;Let the child experiment, eat much or little</td>
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| **Preschooler 3-5 years**<br>Initiative<br>Learning and doing<br>Working toward mastery<br>Symbolic thought: "figures out"
Imitates and tries to please | **Core task:** Provide both structure and trust<br>Make choices about parenting<br>Provide mastery opportunities<br>Maintain structure of meals and snacks<br>Don’t force, reward or shame<br>Parents eat with child; don’t just feed<br>Make mealtimes pleasant |

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