

# Benefits of proper nutrition

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Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a statewide program for families with children birth to age 3, with developmental delays, disabilities, or certain medical diagnoses that may impact development. ECI services support families as they learn to help their children grow and learn.

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**G**ood nutrition is important for everyone, but it's especially important for infants and toddlers. That's because babies need good nutrition to grow, establish strong immune systems, develop healthy body functions, create new brain cells, and achieve developmental milestones.

In addition to nutritious food, babies need loving and responsive feeding. Both breast and bottle feeding give babies the ideal environment for meeting basic social and emotional needs. Infant feeding can be a special time for emotional bonding among families, children, and caregivers. During this time, parents and caregivers can lay the foundation of positive, stable, safe, and secure relationships.

Babies benefit from being held during bottle feeding, even when they are able to hold their own bottles. Bottle feeding is a wonderful opportunity for eye contact, loving touch, and a soothing voice—maybe even a song or two. As a baby gets older, a quick tickle can add laughter and joy to feeding time.

By 4 to 6 months, babies can begin eating soft, semi-solid foods. Soon after that, they take an interest in what other people are eating and drinking. As their fine-motor skills develop, they learn to bring food to their mouths, and sometimes succeed! They also learn to hold and drink from an open cup. This is a messy time, so a plentiful supply of bibs will come in handy.

Self-feeding is an important developmental milestone. It's often accompanied by dropping food, bowls, spoons, and cups on the floor. Again messy, but developmentally appropriate. In spite of how it may seem, they don't do this to give you more work; it's just a part of how they learn. A tarp or towel under the high chair can make cleanup easier.

## Common feeding problems

An estimated 25% of children will experience some type of feeding difficulty. That difficulty may manifest

in one or more of the following behaviors:

- difficulty sucking, swallowing, or chewing;
- vomiting, reflux and excessive drooling, and/or colic;
- partial or total food refusal;
- pickiness;
- inability to try and eat foods with more texture;
- delay in self feeding;
- little to no weight gain, or
- tantrums in and around meal times.

## Appropriate responses

If you care for babies, you can help parents resolve or lessen these difficulties. Provide daily notes on how much a baby eats, when, and whether the child had any difficulty with sucking, swallowing, or digesting the food. Be alert to and document any reflux issues and frequent or large volumes of spitting and/or vomiting patterns.

Encourage self-feeding by allowing the toddler to pick up food and hold a spoon while eating. Make note of any pickiness, delays in self-feeding, refusal to eat, or tantrums during meal times. Parents will value your feedback.

In some cases, a referral to ECI may be appropriate. With parental consent, ECI services can assist the child, family, and child care providers with the knowledge and skills to support children with these difficulties.

To find a local ECI program in your area, visit the ECI program search page at <https://citysearch.hhsc.state.tx.us/> or call the Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Ombudsman at 877-787-8999. ■