Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development includes a principle that significant others in a child’s life impact a child’s growth and development. Adults who work with young children set physical and emotional environments to help children develop healthy eating behaviors. Erikson identified developmental stages that typically developing children face as they grow emotionally and socially. Each developmental period brings skills to be learned. There are four stages of a child’s lifespan and the issues they may experience as they develop. We paired Erikson’s stages with adult feeding strategies that affect each stage.

AGE: INFANT
STAGE: TRUST and MISTRUST

Children develop feelings that they can rely on the consistency and security of their environment.

FEEDING BEHAVIORS

TRUST
Adult sets a comfortable mood and tone, including securely holding and responding to the child as he/she eats.
Adult provides appropriate foods when the baby shows hunger cues.
Adult determines that food temperature is appropriate.
Adult does not unnecessarily interrupt the child’s focus on eating.
Baby is fed when hungry.
Adult stops feeding the baby when the baby shows that he/she is finished eating.
Adult discerns which cues are hunger cues and which cues are indicators of other discomforts, refraining from using feeding as the answer to all cries.
Adult stops feeding when baby turns away from the food.

MISTRUST (Avoid these strategies.)
Adult feeds child on strict schedule, out of harmony with the child’s hunger cues.
Adult forces the nipple or spoon into a child’s mouth.
Adult props the bottle for feeding, rather than holding the child while feeding.
Adult is overly talkative and active during feeding, distracting the infant from eating
Adult feeds the child on every discomfort cue.
In child care settings, older babies are fed in a round robin fashion as they sit in high chairs.
Adult moves from child to child on a rotation schedule determined by the adult, feeding each child mechanically.
AGE: TODDLER
STAGE: AUTONOMY AND SHAME AND DOUBT

Children sense that they are separate human beings and that they have some control over their environments. “No, me do it!” is a common phrase.

FEEDING BEHAVIORS

AUTONOMY
- Children are encouraged to feed themselves, regardless of mess.
- Children may say no to foods, and the adult responds with patience, offering the food again in a short time without scolding.
- Children may combine foods in the way they decide, with the adult being nearby to offer support as needed.
- Children may go on food jags eating only one type of food for days…adult keeps offering a variety of foods.
- Child-sized portions of food are presented.
- Food is served to children so that they can be successful, rather than frustrated. For example, food is cut into bite-sized pieces, rather than served whole.

SHAME AND DOUBT (Avoid these strategies.)
- Adult feeds children even though the children have adequately developed grasps and finger control.
- Adult takes over feeding when the children are eating messily.
- Adult excessively interrupts the children’s eating for hand and face-wiping.
- Adult forces children to clean their plates and to eat all foods, with little regard to the children’s hunger or satiety cues or individual preferences.
- Adult serves child’s plate with adult sized portions.
- Adult does not sit down at the table with the child to offer support for learning new skills.

AGE: EARLY CHILDHOOD
STAGE: INITIATIVE AND GUILT

Children balance taking risks with feeling safe. “I will try” shows a healthy sense of initiative.

FEEDING BEHAVIORS

INITIATIVE
- Adult accepts child’s decision to stop eating when the child says, “I’m full.”
- Adult encourages child to determine how much, if any, of a new food to try.
- Adult respects child’s ability to dislike or like a new food.
- Food is presented to the children so that they can serve themselves, deciding how much to put on their plates.
- Child-sized dinner plates are offered, so the child can judge amounts to serve themselves successfully.
- Child-sized utensils are provided so the child can more easily develop skills for feeding and serving self.
- Spills are expected and treated as routine, rather than crisis events.
GUILT (Avoid these strategies.)

Adult pressures children to eat more food or to eat a specific food.
Adult scolds children for not cleaning their plates.
Adult takes over serving or feeding when a child fails in serving self or in using eating utensils.
Children are offered eating utensils and serving utensils that are too big or heavy for successfully manipulating the food.
Child is chastised when he/she grows fatigued and sloppily uses utensils.
Child is scolded for spills.
Adult shows disappointment or disgust when a child shows dislike of foods.
Adult puts more on child's plate than the child can comfortably eat.
When a child puts too much food on his/her plate, he/she is admonished and made to eat all the food on the plate.
Children are expected to try everything on their plates, and are teased or pressured if they have a negative opinion of that food.

Age: MIDDLE CHILDHOOD
Stage: INDUSTRY AND INFERIORITY

Children develop feelings that they can make things, a sense of “I can do this. I am capable.”

FEEDING BEHAVIORS

INDUSTRY
Child discerns when he or she is hungry or full and acts on these cues.
Environment is set so the children can make snacks or simple meals.
Children choose menus for meals.
Children make suggestions for trying new foods and combinations of food.
Children prepare foods for sharing with friends.
Children help set schedules for mealtimes.

INFERIORITY (Avoid these strategies.)
Children's plates are pre-served.
Adult admonishes and demeans child's attempts at making or serving food.
Children are required to clean their plates.
Children are required to taste everything at the mealtime.
Children's opinions about food are ignored or rejected.