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To: scott@afamilyforeverychild.org
Subject: How to heal food insecurities



Dear ,

Children who have been neglected may develop food anxieties that involve hoarding food, eating until they are sick, or crying at the end of a meal when the food is gone. These fears stem from their days of neglect when they may not have been fed regularly or fed well, leaving them with the feeling of uncertainty about where their next meal will come from. Your child may develop behaviors like hoarding food, for example, as a result. As their parent it is your job to understand why they feel this way, and to assure them that they will be fed on a regular and consistent basis. The following are some strategies that you can employ if your child exhibits any food insecurities. Please keep in mind that these methods are not a "one size fits all", and you may have to try a few before you find one that works for your child. In addition, it may be beneficial to seek out a medical professional for advice on how to help your child, and to make sure that they are healthy.

Food-insecurity behaviors

The following are some behaviors that your child may exhibit if they have food anxieties:

- Eating quickly
- Stuffing food
- Hiding, hoarding or stealing food
- Continuing to eat, even after they are full and are borderline nauseous
- Getting upset if someone takes food or eats off their plate
- Believing that food is limited
- "Pocketing" food in their mouth for hours

Children do this as a self-preservation tool. It is a survival instinct in all of us to keep our energy going, especially when we do not know where our next meal is coming from. Even after children are fed reliably, they may exhibit these behaviors for weeks, months or even years as they are so ingrained into their habits. It will take time for them to understand and trust that they will be fed consistently.

Helping to heal your child's food insecurities

Some resources will tell families that letting their child keep a baggie or container of food on them or in their room will slowly appease their food anxieties. By having snacks on their person, a child may feel comforted by the thought that he/she has food readily available, even if they do not eat it. Overtime, your child may lose interest in having food in their room, pocket or backpack. If you do allow your child to have this "stash" of food, it is important that you still provide consistent meals. Other children may not respond well to having a stash of food readily available, and will eat it immediately and beg for more. In this case, you will have to come up with an alternative strategy for providing your child with food security.

One important thing to keep in mind is that you give your child food yourself whenever possible. If you let your child get their own food, this may leave them with the feeling that they must still rely on themselves, and not you. By being the one that provides your child with meals whenever possible, this will show them that you are there to take care of them, and are a reliable source of food. This in turn will help lessen their food anxieties, and will help your child bond and form an attachment with you.

Strategies to reduce food anxieties

The following are some strategies you can employ to help reduce your child's anxiety over food:

- Feed younger children every 2-3 hours; older children every 3-4 hours
- Offer food more frequently at first to assure your child that there is food for them
- Always give them frequent reassurance that you will not run out of food
- If your child cries at the end of a meal because he/she believes that there is no more

food, show them the pantry and the fridge to reassure them that they will be fed again

- Maintain structure. If you are going to be out, make sure to bring a snack.
- At first allow the child to eat as much or as little of the meal. This will give the child a reassuring sense of control
- Don't serve your child a pre-plated meal: let them serve themselves instead
- Invite your child to participate in the meal planning, by letting them choose a side or a vegetable

You can learn more about helping your child overcome their food anxieties and see more examples on NACAC's Winter 2013 *Adoptalk* publication [Healing From Food Insecurity: Beyond the Stash](#).

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