
Role Modelling

Healthy Eating: Guidance for Support Workers & Families

Helping adults with Learning Disabilities build healthier relationships with food

Why Your Role Modelling Matters

People with learning disabilities often learn most effectively through **copying what they see**, not just what they are told. This means the everyday choices you make whilst working with them - what you eat, buy, cook, and talk about - send powerful messages about what 'normal' eating looks like.

You influence behaviour more than information ever will

- People naturally **mirror the habits** of those around them.
- When you make healthier choices consistently with the person you support, they are more likely to **trust, try and repeat** those behaviours.
- Role modelling helps reduce anxiety and increases confidence, especially when new foods, routines or expectations feel unfamiliar.

Healthy role modelling builds skills and independence

It shows:

- What balanced meals look like
- How to plan and stick to a shopping list
- How to include fruits, vegetables, fibre and protein
- How to manage portion sizes
- How to enjoy treats occasionally without guilt or secrecy

You can demonstrate real life tools the individual will need to maintain a healthy weight long term.

Your behaviour can support or undermine progress

Even small inconsistencies can cause confusion:

- Eating separate "treats" from the person
- Giving mixed messages ("you shouldn't eat / drink that" while having it yourself)

Clear, calm, and consistent actions help the person feel safe and supported - not policed.

What Good Role Modelling Looks Like

Eat in the way you hope they will eat

You don't need to be perfect, but you do need to be consistent.

Healthy role modelling includes:

- Choosing water or sugar free drinks at meals
- Eating the same meal or a very similar meal
- Keeping treat foods occasional and portion controlled
- Enjoying food without negative talk (avoid "I'm being naughty" or "I feel guilty")
- Sitting at the table and eating slowly

Show balanced, realistic eating

Role modelling isn't dieting. It's demonstrating:

- Regular meals
- Nourishing snacks
- Variety
- Foods you enjoy
- Flexibility (e.g. swapping chips for veg, grilling instead of frying)

This helps the person understand that healthy eating is **normal life**, not punishment.

Model positive attitudes to food

Your language matters as much as your behaviour.

Try to:

- Speak positively about healthy foods
- Celebrate small wins ("We added extra veg today - great!")
- Reduce moral judgments ("good" vs "bad" food)
- Emphasise how food helps the body feel strong, energised and well

Avoid:

- Negative body talk
- Criticism of someone's weight
- Diet culture messages ("I can't eat that, I'm being good")

You are teaching not just what to eat, but how to feel about eating.

How Your Behaviour Shapes Their Decisions

You reduce anxiety and build confidence

New foods, new routines, and environments like supermarkets can feel overwhelming. When you demonstrate calm, confident behaviour - tasting a new food, comparing labels, sticking to a list - the individual is more likely to try it too.

You reinforce consistency

Healthy routines stick best when everyone follows them. This prevents:

- Mixed messages
- Food-seeking
- “They say no but they say yes” conflicts
- Confusion around limits and expectations

When the whole support network models the same approach, the person is far more likely to succeed.

You show that change is possible

Seeing you help and support them making sensible, healthy choices, helps the person believe that these changes are normal and achievable.

Your behaviour shapes their environment

Role modelling isn't just eating well - it's:

- Bringing healthier foods into the home
- Storing treat foods out of sight
- Planning meals together
- Showing how to read a label
- Encouraging walks or light activity after meals

Environments influence choices as much as willpower.

Practical Ways to Role Model Daily

- Drink water with meals
- Involve them in cooking - prepare food together
- Keep everyone's portions balanced
- Only buy foods you are happy for them to see and copy
- Try new foods with them
- Follow the same weekly food routine (shopping day, cooking night, food diary)
- Show enthusiasm - your mood is contagious
- Demonstrate how to pause before snacking ("Am I hungry or bored?")
- Use closed choices: *"Shall we have chicken with veg or fish with veg?"*

Your Behaviour Makes the Biggest Difference

Your behaviour is one of the strongest tools you have.

Everyone, not just people with learning disabilities, thrive when guidance is:

- Clear
- Predictable
- Demonstrated - not just explained
- Positive and encouraging

By modelling healthy eating, calm attitudes and consistent habits, you are not just supporting weight management - you are teaching lifelong skills that improve health, confidence, independence and wellbeing.