

Tips on Feeding Your Picky Toddler or Preschooler

We all want the best for our children and that includes good eating habits. A child may refuse to eat part or all of the family meal or only certain foods. This can be frustrating or worrisome.

If mealtimes are a struggle, following these tips will help your child develop better eating habits.

Sharing the Responsibility

Parents and children have different jobs in feeding. Follow this advice to help your child learn to eat a variety of food.

The parent's/caregiver's job is to decide:

- | What food and drinks are served. Make one family meal, not different meals. When you eat and serve a variety of healthy foods according to "Canada's Food Guide" www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide, your child will learn to eat these foods too.
- | When food is served. When children eat at set times they are more likely to come to the table hungry and try new foods.
- | Where food is served. Children will eat healthier when you eat together at the table.

Your child's job is to decide:

- | If and how much to eat from the food and drinks you have served. Trust that your child knows when he is hungry or full.



Steps you can take

1. Eat together as often as possible. This helps to teach your child healthy eating habits, table manners and how to use utensils. It also provides a time to role model healthy eating.

2. Keep mealtimes pleasant and relaxed. Let your child eat with his fingers. Don't expect good table manners yet. That way he will want to come to the table to eat.

3. Set regular meal and snack times. Offer 3 meals and 2-3 snacks at regular times each day. Do not let your child graze or eat throughout the day. Offer only water in between meals and snacks. Even a little milk, juice or few crackers can spoil your child's appetite. This will help your child come to the table hungry and ready to try new foods. If your child refuses a meal or does not eat anything in about 10-15 minutes, calmly remove his food. Let him down from the table to play quietly while the rest of the family finishes eating. It could be your child is filling up on milk or juice. Offer only 125 mL (½ cup) of milk or juice at a meal or snack. If he is still thirsty offer him water.

4. Seat your child at the table securely in a high chair or booster seat for meals and snacks. Avoid distractions such as the phone, TV, computer, radio and toys at the table. This helps you and your child to focus on eating.

5. Don't make separate meals for your child. Your child will not learn to eat a variety of food if you only serve what he likes to eat. Always serve one food you know your child will eat (for example, bread, milk, rice, potatoes) so he won't go hungry.

6. Let your child decide if and how much to eat from the food you serve. Your child's appetite can vary depending on growth spurts, activity level, whether he is tired or ill, and where he is eating (for example at home or at day care). Trust that his body will let him know when he is hungry or full. Give him smaller portions and let him ask for more. As he gets older he can serve himself.

7. Avoid pressure, praise, rewards, tricks or punishment. Children do not eat well when they are pressured to eat.

8. Offer a variety of foods at each meal. Serve new foods:

- | In small amounts along with familiar food.
- | When your child is healthy and hungry.
- | In different ways. Carrots can be mashed, soft cooked or grated into muffins or meatloaf.

Don't be discouraged if your child does not like new foods on the first try. Sometimes it can take 15 tastes before a child likes a new food.

9. Grow, pick, cook and shop for food together. Your child will be more open to trying new food.

Common questions and answers

How do I know if my preschooler is getting enough?

If your child is growing well, seems healthy and happy he is likely doing fine. When your child grows faster, he will eat more. When he grows slower, he will eat less. There is no need for concern about the odd skipped meal. Contact your health care provider if:

- | You are concerned about your child's growth or general health.
- | Your child is not drinking about 500 mL (2 cups) of milk or fortified soy beverage most days. He may not be getting enough calcium and vitamin D.
- | Your child refuses certain types of healthy foods. He may not be getting enough nutrients such as iron.

Should I give my toddler a vitamin-mineral supplement?

One-to-two year old breastfed or partly breastfed toddlers need 400 IU of vitamin D from a supplement every day.

Other toddlers only need a vitamin D supplement if they do not drink cow's milk or vitamin D fortified milk alternatives. These toddlers should receive a 400 IU vitamin D supplement each day.

Most children do not need other vitamin or mineral supplements. Ask your health care provider before offering supplements. Whole foods offer more nutrition than supplements can provide.

What can I do when my child wants a snack and it's not snack time?

Tell your child that he can eat at the next meal or snack time. Offer only water between meal and snack times. Be loving but firm about no food between meals and snacks. Try to redirect your child to another activity.

My child wants to eat the same thing over and over again. What should I do?

This is a “food jag.” It is common and can last several weeks or months. Usually it is no cause for concern. As long as your child’s favourite food is nutritious continue to offer it to your child. Keep offering a variety of healthy foods. For example, if plain pasta is your child’s favourite, you can serve that but also offer cooked frozen peas, hard-cooked eggs, apple slices and milk. In time he will eat different foods.

My toddler gags. Is that normal?

Gagging or coughing food back up is normal. It helps to prevent choking. Choking is not normal. Choking happens when food is not swallowed properly. Help prevent choking by:

- | Cutting up food into small pieces.
- | Reminding your toddler to chew his food and eat slowly.
- | Ensuring that your child is sitting upright, paying attention to what he is eating, and is not distracted by playing or watching TV while he is eating. Do not offer food in the car. Focus on the food and sharing time together.
- | Always supervising meal and snack times. Choking can happen quickly and unexpectedly.

If gagging, trouble swallowing or choking happens often, contact your health care provider.



Additional Resources

- | Feeding a Healthy Toddler (12 to 36 months old)
<https://www.pennutrition.com/viewhandout.aspx?Portal=UbY=&id=JMzvWw0=&PreviewHandout=bA==>

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Notes

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