

# Healthy Beginnings

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## Managing mealtimes

### Create positive mealtimes with your young child

Raising a child who is a good eater means choosing healthy foods for your child and having your child join the family meal and learn how to enjoy food.

Children and parents or caregivers each have roles for meal and snack times. Sticking to these roles will help your child become a healthy eater and enjoy family mealtimes.

Your role as the adult is to decide what foods to offer, when to offer these foods and where your child will eat.

Your child's role is to decide how much to eat of the foods you have offered. This could mean that your child might choose not to eat at all. Trust your child to eat what they need for their body and growth from the food you provide. Letting your child take control of their eating will support their development of healthy self-esteem and mental health.

Set and consistently follow these roles and respect your child's hunger and fullness. Trying to control how much and which foods they will eat will not help your child become a healthy eater and will create mealtime struggles.

What you say and do during mealtime can also effect your child's eating habits. Pressuring a child during mealtime, positively or negatively, does not help them eat more or less of something.

Negative pressure can include reminding a child to eat, or punishing them for not eating. Positive or "nice" pressure includes offering rewards for a

child that eats. Anything you say or do to get your child to eat more or less of something is pressure. Any kind of pressure, positive or negative, during feeding will eventually not go as you planned.

Let your child eat until they are full. Your child might eat a lot or a little. This is normal. Babies and children are able to self-regulate their food intake.

If you follow your role as a parent or caregiver, your child will learn their own hunger and fullness. Depending on your child's age, it can take a few days to a few months for your child to learn their feelings of hunger and fullness.

Changes in how much and what your child eats are normal. What your child loved today might be refused tomorrow.

### Helpful strategies to manage mealtimes

- Eat together at the table as a family often
- Provide a healthy meal or snack every two and a half to three hours
- Do not allow electronics or toys at the table
- Be patient. Patience is better than pressure
- Let your child serve themselves at the table. Teach them to take small amounts at first. Tell them they can take more if they are hungry
- Be neutral when talking about food and eating with your child. It is fine to share that you enjoy what you are eating, but being overly positive or negative about a food might pressure your child



## Types of pressure to avoid during mealtime

Pressuring your child about their eating will not help them try a food or eat more or less of something. Big eaters and small eaters know how much to eat for their healthy growth. Read the below scenarios of common ways children might feel pressured during feeding and what you can say or do instead.

Types of pressure that will not help your child's eating	What you can do or say instead that might help your child's eating
<p><b>Praising</b> Your child tried a new food and you want to acknowledge it. You say, "You are a good girl for trying the peas."</p>	<p>"I see you tried it." "What did you think?" Children are more likely to try a new food if they do not feel pressured and are able to make their own choices from the foods offered.</p>
<p><b>Bribing or rewarding with fun activities or food</b> "If you try this, we will go to the park." "If you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert."</p>	<p>"We can have these vegetables again another time. Next time would you like them raw instead of cooked?" It is important not to reward your child for eating a food. When rewarded with dessert for eating more vegetables, the desire for dessert is increased. Some children will eat more of a food even if they aren't hungry, just to get dessert.</p>
<p><b>Punishment for not eating</b> "Since you didn't eat that, we can't go outside and play."</p>	<p>Punishment hurts your child's development. Say nothing about what your child eats or does not eat. Children can focus on eating because they are hungry and stop when they are full.</p>
<p><b>Talking about food being healthy</b> "These will make you grow big and strong."</p>	<p>Offer foods that are nutritious. Let your child choose from what you provide.</p>
<p><b>Persuading or reminding</b> "You've tried it before." "Don't forget to eat your meat."</p>	<p>"You don't have to try it or swallow it if you don't want to." Provide a napkin so your child can politely spit out the food. "Do you like that?" Phrases like the ones above make your child feel like they are making choices. Trying to persuade or remind your child to eat a certain food, makes the food even less desirable to them.</p>
<p><b>The one-bite or two-bite rule</b> "You don't have to like it, but you do have to take a bite of every food."</p>	<p>The one-bite rule does not respect your child's job with feeding. It is up to your child to decide what foods to eat. This might mean they eat only one or two of the foods on the table; that is okay. Sometimes new foods take time.</p>
<p><b>Scolding or shaming</b> "You are wasting food." "Why don't you finish your food like your brother?" "If you do not eat all the food on your plate, I'll be mad."</p>	<p>Prepare smaller amounts of food to decrease waste. Do not compare one child to another, each child will eat for their own growth needs. Trying to get your child to clean their plate is telling them to ignore their own hunger and fullness signs. Allow your child to eat a little or a lot from the meal you prepared.</p>



Types of pressure that will not help your child's eating	What you can do or say instead that might help your child's eating
<b>Comforting with food</b> "I know what will make that boo boo go away - have a little snack."	Use words and hugs to comfort children rather than food. Providing a treat when your child is upset teaches that in order to feel better they should eat.

The chart below offers ideas to solve common mealtime situations and promote positive eating habits. As a reminder:

- Your job is to determine the what, when and where of feeding
- Your child's job is to determine how much to eat and whether to eat

### Ideas to solve common mealtime situations

What your child says or does	Helpful things you can say	Helpful things you can do
Child says, "I'm not hungry" or does not want to come to the table	"That's okay. You do not have to eat. Just sit with us for a while."	Have everyone join the table during mealtime whether or not they eat. Enjoy time with each other during family meals.
Child wants to leave the table before you are finished eating	"If your tummy is telling you that you are full, you may be excused."	Let your child leave when they are finished eating.
Child drops or throws food	"If you are no longer hungry you are excused from the table."	Ignore the behaviour. If it continues, give your child one warning and then ask them to leave the table. Maintain a schedule of a meal or snack every two and a half to three hours.
Child refuses to eat at dinner, but 30 minutes later says they are hungry	"We just finished dinner. It is not time to eat now. You will have to wait until snack time. When it is snack time you can have something to eat."	Keep a meal and snack schedule and do not offer food in between. Help your child to learn that they can eat at meal and snack times, but cannot graze on food all day. After two to three days, your child will learn to eat during meal and snack times.
Child does not eat much or eats a lot at mealtime	Say nothing.	Trust that your child knows how much they need to eat for healthy growth. They can remain at the table to be part of conversation.
Child just wants to drink but not eat throughout the day	Remind your child that meal or snack time is coming up soon.	Offer your child milk in a cup at scheduled meal and snack times only. In between, offer water only. Do not offer milk or juice in between.



What your child says or does	Helpful things you can say	Helpful things you can do
Child says “I don’t like this” or “I’m not going to eat this”	<p>“Please say no thank you.”</p> <p>“You may choose what you would like to eat from what is on the table.”</p>	At meals, include one or two foods that your child usually will eat. Let them fill up on these foods if they wish. If there is no pressure, your child will eventually try most foods when they are ready. Do not make a separate meal or offer something else to eat. This will help your child learn to like a variety of foods. Teach children how to be polite about refusing food.
Child is crying at the table	“You’re crying. I think you might not be feeling good inside. Tell me about it.”	It is important to validate your child’s feelings. Stop eating and comfort your child with a hug. Help your child to calm themselves and continue eating.
Child wants to eat the same foods over and over	Say nothing.	Many children go through phases of eating a particular food for a period of time. Continue to offer that food along with other foods. Eventually, they will get tired of that food.

For more information and additional nutrition resources, visit [york.ca/feedingkids](http://york.ca/feedingkids)

Speak to a registered dietitian at no cost by calling EatRight Ontario at 1-877-510-5102 or by going to [ontario.ca/eatright](http://ontario.ca/eatright)

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