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Managing Mealtime Struggles



If you have toddlers at your table, mealtime can often be stressful. Follow these tips to help make mealtime enjoyable for the whole family.

Children are naturally choosy when it comes to eating.

They are cautious about trying new foods. The bananas they gobbled up at lunch may end up in the floor at dinner. While this behavior is very normal, it can cause struggles and lead to unpleasant mealtimes.

What is Normal Eating?

- Liking a food one day but not the next.
- Eating small amounts at one meal and cleaning their plate at the following meal.
- Trying a new food and refusing to eat it.
- Seeing a new food many times before tasting it.

Division of Responsibility

When it comes to feeding your child, you have 3 responsibilities. You decide:

- *what* your child eats.
- *when* she eats.
- and *where* she eats.

Your child is responsible for:

- *how much* she eats
- and *whether* she eats

Do your job with feeding and let your child do her job.



Here are some tips that can help you manage mealtime struggles.

- 1. Stick to a routine.** Serve meals and snacks at about the same times every day. If your child chooses not to eat a meal, a regular snack time will offer an opportunity to eat nutritious food. You can provide milk with the food, but offer water between meals and snacks. Allowing your child to fill up on juice, milk or snacks throughout the day might decrease his or her appetite for meals.
- 2. Respect your child's appetite—or lack of one.** If your child refuses a meal, avoid fussing over it. It's good for children to learn to listen to their bodies and use hunger as a guide. If they ate a large lunch, they may not be interested in eating much at dinner. It is your child's job to decide what she eats. Pressuring kids to eat, or punishing them if they don't, can make them actively dislike foods they may otherwise like.
- 3. Break from bribes.** Don't bribe your children with treats for eating other foods. This can make the "prize" food even more exciting, and the food you want them to try an unpleasant chore. It also can lead to nightly battles at the dinner table.
- 4. Try, try again.** If a child refuses a food once, don't give up. Keep offering new and disliked foods. It can take as many as 10 or more times tasting a food before a toddler's taste buds accept it. Scheduled meals and limiting snacks can help ensure your child is hungry when a new food is introduced.
- 5. Tiny chefs.** Some cooking tasks are perfect for toddlers (with lots of supervision, of course): sifting, stirring, counting ingredients, picking fresh herbs from a garden or windowsill. Allow your little chef to help plan the menu and pick which fruit or vegetable to make for dinner.



- 6. Variety: the spice.** Offer a variety of healthy foods, especially vegetables and fruits, and include higher protein foods like meat, peanut butter and eggs. Help your child explore new flavors and textures in food. Try adding different herbs and spices to simple meals to make them tastier.
- 7. Make food fun.** Toddlers like trying foods arranged in eye-catching, creative ways. Make foods look irresistible by arranging them in fun, colorful shapes. Kids also enjoy any food involving a dip. Finger foods are usually a hit with toddlers. Cut solid foods into bite size pieces they can easily eat themselves, making sure the pieces are small enough to avoid the risk of choking.
- 8. Family style.** Eat together as a family as often as you can. Turn off the electronic devices. Use this time to model healthy eating. Serve one meal for the whole family. Do not make special foods if your child refuses to eat what you've served. This only encourages picky eating. Try to include at least one food your child likes with each meal and continue to provide a balanced meal, whether she eats it or not.



- 9. Crossing bridges.** Once a food is accepted, use what nutritionists call “food bridges” to introduce others with similar color, flavor and texture to help expand variety in what your child will eat. If your child likes pumpkin pie, for example, try mashed sweet potatoes and then mashed carrots.
- 10. A fine pair.** Try serving unfamiliar foods, or flavors young children tend to dislike at first (sour and bitter), with familiar foods toddlers naturally prefer (sweet and salty). Pairing broccoli (bitter) with grated cheese (salty), for example, is a great combination for toddler taste buds.

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