

Feeding Kids Right Isn't Always Easy: Tips for Preventing Food Hassles



Feeding kids—getting started

Happy encounters with food at any age help set the stage for sensible eating habits throughout life. When adults provide and promote nutritious foods in a calm and positive setting, children will be more willing to make healthy food choices.

The following are 8 important mealtime tips to keep in mind:

1. Do not force your children to eat. While parents are the best judges of what children should eat and when, children are the best judges of how much they should eat.
2. Offer a variety of healthy and tasty foods. Be adventurous!
3. Serve meals and snacks on a regular schedule.
4. Make mealtime a pleasant social occasion. Turn off the TV and enjoy family time together.
5. Set a good example in your choice of foods and drinks.
6. Do not use food as a punishment or a reward.
7. Involve your children in food discussions, planning, purchasing, and preparation.
8. Encourage and teach good manners at the table.

Read on for more tips about food choices, good nutrition for young children, and how to prevent food hassles. For specific advice, talk with your child's doctor or a registered dietitian.

Mealtime is more than food

Food choices are a way of life. Set a good example by eating meals at consistent times and by making healthy and tasty food choices. Encourage your child to try different foods. Teach your child valuable lessons about food by involving your child with food planning, purchasing, and preparation. Remember that the best predictor of a child with a healthy weight and lifestyle is parents with a healthy weight who make wise food choices. And regular exercise is important too!

Mealtime is family time. Set a good example by eating meals at consistent times with everyone seated together. Children learn many things when the family eats together. They get to learn more about each other, and their attitudes about foods are also influenced. When children learn positive eating habits at a young age, they will make healthy food choices as an adult.

Did you know?

Encouraging your child to wash his or her hands thoroughly before meals will help prevent foodborne illness.

Three, two, one...let's eat!

Prepare children for meals. A 5-minute warning before mealtime lets them calm down, wash their hands, and get ready to eat. A child who is anxious, excited, or tired may have trouble settling down to eat. Sometimes a simple "food rules" chart on the refrigerator helps establish order and the child's mealtime behavior. This also helps mom and dad to follow the "rules" as well. Stick to the rules to encourage children to eat and help prevent arguments over food.

Examples of food rules include the following:

1. Come to the table with clean hands.
2. Help when asked.
3. No bad comments about food served or what others are eating, etc.

Occasional meal skipping and finicky food habits are OK

Well-meaning adults often view a child's odd food and eating behaviors as a problem. However, childhood food jags, a fear of new foods, and other feeding challenges are usually a part of normal development.

There's no need to worry if a child skips a meal or won't eat the vegetables on his or her plate. Keep the big picture in mind. Offer a variety of healthy, nourishing foods. Provide nutritious snacks to help round out picky eating habits at meals. Over time, a child will get everything needed to grow and develop normally. Be creative! A variety of colors, kid-friendly shaped foods, and foods arranged on the plate in an appealing manner can entice children to try foods they might otherwise avoid. Plenty of food variety and a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere at mealtime are the "ingredients" for a well-fed child.

Children often use the table as a stage for showing their independence. Sometimes food is not the issue at all. The eating process is just one more way children learn about the world.

Work up an appetite!

Active play, along with eating right, promotes good health...and a healthy appetite! And it is the best exercise for toddlers and young children.

Making a snowman, playing tag, throwing balls, riding a bike, and taking a walk are healthy and fun for the whole family. Don't just watch. Join in and be active too. When you're physically active, you set a good example.

How to make mealtime a more pleasant experience

Here are 6 common unpleasant and unhealthy childhood eating situations and tips to handle them. Also, remember that food should be used as nourishment, not as a reward or punishment. In the long run, food rewards or bribes usually create more problems than they solve.

The feeding challenge...	What you can try...
Food jags: Eats only one food, meal after meal	Let the child eat what he or she wants if the jag food is healthy. Make sure the child is hungry at mealtime and offer other foods at each meal before the jag food. Don't remove the jag food, but offer it as long as the child wants it. After a few days, the child likely will try other foods. Food jags rarely last long enough to cause any harm.
Food strikes: Refuses to eat what's served, which can lead to "short-order cook syndrome"	Make sure the child is hungry when mealtime comes. Do not offer juices, sweetened drinks, or snacks too close to mealtime. Have whole-grain bread and rolls as well as fruit available at each meal, so there are usually choices that the child likes. Be supportive, set limits, and don't be afraid to let the child go hungry if he or she won't eat what is served.
"The TV habit": Wants to watch TV at mealtime	Turn off the TV. Watching TV during mealtimes is a distraction that prevents family interaction and interferes with a child's eating. Value the time spent together while eating. Often it is the only time during the day that families can be together.
The complainer: Whines or complains about the food served	First ask the child to eat other foods offered at the meal. If the child refuses, have the child go to his or her room or sit quietly away from the table until the meal is finished. Don't let him or her take food along, return for dessert, or eat until the next planned meal or snack time.
"The great American white food diet": Eats only white bread, potatoes, macaroni, and milk	Avoid pressuring the child to eat other foods. Giving more attention to finicky eating habits only reinforces a child's demands to limit foods. Continue to offer a variety of foods from all the food groups. Encourage a taste of whole grains as well as red, orange, and green foods. Eventually the child will move on to other foods.
Fear of new foods: Refuses to try new foods	Continue to introduce and reinforce new foods over time. It may take many tries before a child is ready to taste a new food. . .and a lot of tastes before a child likes it. A good starting point is to encourage the child to simply allow a small portion of the new food to sit on his or her plate. Don't force the child to try new foods. Also, remember that you are a role model—make sure your child sees you enjoying the food.

Note: Do not feed children younger than 4 round, firm food unless it is chopped completely. The following foods are choking hazards: nuts and seeds; chunks of meat or cheese; hot dogs; whole grapes; fruit chunks (such as apples); popcorn; raw vegetables; hard, gooey, or sticky candy; and chewing gum. Peanut butter can be a choking hazard for children younger than 2.

MyPyramid.gov food and menu planner

For the latest information from the US Department of Agriculture about making healthy food choices and keeping physically active, visit their Web site at www.mypyramid.gov. MyPyramid offers individualized tools, including a food and menu planner. Dietary information is available for the general public starting at age 2 and older.

Developed in collaboration with the American Dietetic Association (ADA). For more information about the ADA, visit their web site at www.eatright.org.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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