

Tips for Feeding Young Children

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Eating should be a pleasurable experience, although parents and caregivers with toddlers and preschoolers may sometimes wonder. Young children alternately refuse and then demand certain foods; some children seem to eat so little they can't possibly thrive (most do).

Almost every time they sit down to eat, young children encounter many new foods, while simultaneously learning to manage utensils and cups. Parents and caregivers can reduce the stress and tension triggered when feeding toddlers and preschoolers by following these two basic guidelines:

- Provide a wide variety of nutritious foods at regular two- to three-hour intervals (usually three meals and two or three snacks each day).
- Allow the child to be responsible for deciding how much of each food to eat and the order in which to eat them; the child may decide not to eat anything.

Offering Foods

- When you serve a new food to a child, make sure it's accompanied by familiar foods. Encourage the child to taste it, but don't expect her to accept it the first time. Two-year-olds are especially suspicious, generally refusing unfamiliar foods several times before trying them. Accept the child's decision with no comment.
- Encouraging or forcing children to eat more than they want reduces their ability to know when they are full, leading to overweight and even obese children.

- Serve fruit and vegetable finger foods rather than a mixed dish. Children are suspicious of things they don't recognize; they often dislike casseroles because they can't identify the foods. Children also prefer to keep their foods separate and don't like one food to touch another.
- Arrange food attractively on small plates. Avoid bribes, gimmicks, and games to get a child to eat. As soon as a child is finished eating, respect his wishes to stop.
- When children finish quickly or eat little or nothing, have them stay at the table for a few minutes and talk pleasantly about the day's activities and tomorrow's plans. Mealtimes are not occasions for discipline or unpleasant discussion.
- Keep portions small. A spoonful of fruits and vegetables, a quarter of a slice of bread, and two or three small bites of meat may be sufficient for small eaters. Allow children to ask for seconds after they have finished their first servings.
- Don't run a short-order kitchen, responding to a variety of requests from different family members.

What to Expect from Young Children

- When children refuse to eat a regular meal or snack and then return to the kitchen just as it's cleaned up asking for something to eat, tell them pleasantly that the next meal or snack will be forthcoming at the usual time. A child

will not starve in that short time and will learn to observe a regular eating schedule.

- Do not present dessert as a reward or incentive for eating. Allow children to eat dessert first if they wish—especially if it’s already on the table—followed by other foods. Provide necessary nutrients by serving desserts such as fruits, yogurt, and pudding.
- Children have small stomachs and need to eat several times throughout the day. Provide small meals and snacks to maintain a consistent supply of energy and nutrients for growth and activity.
- Children learn to know when they are satisfied if they are allowed to select their own diet from a variety of nutritious foods and eat only as much as they want. These children are more likely to develop life-long good eating habits.
- Be patient with children’s idiosyncrasies. A child may think a sandwich isn’t really a sandwich unless it’s cut diagonally, want milk served in one cup and juice in another, or expect the customary place mat same side up every time. For the child, these are important parts of the meal. These needs generally fade over time.
- Children frequently develop food fads. For example, a child may request a peanut butter sandwich at snacktime for days or weeks. As long as the requests don’t disrupt the family meal plan, it’s easier to comply, as these requests pass with time.
- Children in day care are often hungry when you pick them up at the end of the day. Provide them with a light snack as soon as they get home.
- Hungry children are not patient. When you eat away from home, bring a few crackers or wedges of fresh fruit to take the edge off their appetites as they wait for a meal.
- Children go through temporary periods of not eating. Be careful *not* to hover over the child at

mealtime or strive to feed the child by preparing a special dish. Don’t offer rewards or incentives or allow the child to dictate the family meal plan—or you may find yourself with a finicky eater. Children recognize when they have power over adults and will use their skill to manipulate adults.

Making Mealtimes Pleasant

- Two-year-olds may stay with a meal for as long as 10 minutes; four-year-olds are usually ready to leave the table in 20 minutes.
- Make the child’s chair a comfortable height for sitting at the table. Provide a foot support to prevent leg fatigue.
- Children should always sit when eating—most choking occurs when children are running.
- Provide tip- and spill-proof glasses for drinks. When spills occur, let children help clean up.
- Children generally eat better when an adult sits with them. Be patient with slow eaters who may become involved in the eating process itself or visiting. Eliminate the distractions of television, toys, or other activities.

Serving Foods Safely

- Cut all foods, especially meats, into small, bite-sized pieces to prevent choking.
- Cool foods to room temperature to avoid burns.
- Provide child-sized utensils. Using small pitchers, children can pour their own milk or juice.
- Use nonbreakable dishes and cups. Cloth and plastic placemats protect the table from spills and stray food.
- Some foods are unsafe for children under age three, including nuts, small rounded candies, weiners, and raw carrots. They are difficult to

manage in the mouth and are likely to cause choking.

- Children usually do not like spicy or hot seasoned foods until they are elementary-school age or even older.

Offering Nutritious Foods

- Avoid offering children foods low in nutrients and extremely high in fat and sodium. Young children need only about 1000 calories per day, so too many low-nutrient, high-calorie foods (such as cookies, candy, chips, and soft drinks) will displace high-nutrient foods. Poor food choices threaten children's growth and health.
- Children often prefer raw vegetables to cooked ones. Thin strips of zucchini, bell pepper, celery, and carrots dipped in cottage cheese or yogurt spreads or low-fat salad dressing are good food choices.
- Choose real fruit and vegetable juices rather than artificial fruit drinks, which are high in sugar and low in nutrients.
- Keep a supply of quick, nutritious snacks readily available for occasions when you have both hungry children and a tight schedule. Cheese, crackers, and juices are quick, nutritious fillers.
- The best role models for good eating habits are the adults and older children who care for children. Older children who have been allowed to choose what they want to eat are less likely to criticize a food, discouraging other children from eating it, too.

Good Foods for Young Children

Focus on serving children these nutritious foods:

Vegetables: Thin carrot strips (children over age three), cherry tomato halves, tomatoes, mushrooms, cut-up lettuce, ripe avocado, asparagus tips, sweet pepper strips, zucchini squash strips, corn, broccoli and cauliflower tips,

green beans, cooked sweet potato, mashed potatoes, oven-baked potato fries, peas, cooked and uncooked frozen vegetables, celery with strings removed.

Fruits In thin wedges or bite-sized pieces: Apples, pears, peaches, oranges, mandarin oranges, canned fruits, fresh berries (halved), watermelon with seeds removed, cantaloupe, banana.

Breads and Cereals: Toast, arrowroot cookies, zwieback crackers, soda crackers, pretzels, bagels, unsweetened cereals served either dry or with milk, regular and instant hot cereals, cooked pasta (including noodles, macaroni, and spaghetti), whole-grain breads and buns, rice.

Dairy: Cheese cubes and slices, yogurt, low-fat milk.

Meats, Fish, Poultry, Other: Tender, diced beef, chicken, and fish; fish sticks; ground meat; hot dog spears (split lengthwise into fourths and then in halves); hard-cooked eggs; well-cooked legumes such as beans; peanut butter.

Original Publication written by Alice Jane Hendley, former Extension Specialist Emerita

Additional Resources

E.M. Satter. *How to Get Your Kid to Eat. . . But Not Too Much*. Palo Alto: Bull Publishing Co., 1987.

E.M. Satter. *Child of Mine: Feeding With Love and Good Sense*. Palo Alto: Bull Publishing Co., 1991.

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