

HELPING CHILDREN LEARN TO EAT

- **ESTABLISH ROUTINES FOR MEALTIMES**
Children's tummies are small and they need to have meals/snacks scheduled five to six times daily (every 2 ½ to 3 hours) beginning from around nine to twelve months of age. Think of snacks as small meals. Offer three to four healthy food choices at each meal (fruit/vegetable, protein, carb and a drink). Do not become a short order cook. And do not allow grazing between meal/snack times. If children are not hungry or interested in eating much at one meal/snack, they will have another opportunity in a short while. This is how children learn to recognize hunger cues and cues that they are full.
- **A PARENT'S JOB IS TO PRESENT APPROPRIATE AND VARIED FOOD CHOICES AT REGULAR MEALTIMES. YOUR CHILD'S JOB IS TO DECIDE HOW MUCH TO EAT.**
Trust that your child will learn to eat an amount and variety of foods for their own nutrition and energy level. All children are different. Remember that children's quantities are small when they are young. A general guideline is to present one tablespoon of each food (fruit/vegetable, protein, carb) per age of child. It is easy to overwhelm children with too much on the plate at one time. Start with small amounts and let your child request more.
- **ESTABLISH FAMILY MEALTIMES**
Children learn to eat by modeling others. When children eat in front of the television or when there are too many distractions, they are not able to tune into their bodies and process the sensory experiences of food. Sometimes, parents get into the habit of using distractions because they think that is the only way they can get their child to eat. This does not allow the child to learn to eat and becomes a vicious cycle.
- **RECOGNIZE THAT WE ALL HAVE FOOD PREFERENCES**
Children usually develop preferences based on foods they have been exposed to. This food exposure (to taste and smell) begins before your baby is born based on the foods that mom eats. If mom breastfeeds, this exposure continues after birth. Later, babies learn to eat foods presented by spoon. It is typical for babies and young children to need at least 10 opportunities to taste a new food before deciding if it is preferred. One of the most common problems leading to picky eating is when parents stop providing opportunities for children to eat new foods. Another reason is related to parental pressure for children to taste or eat foods they are not ready to eat.
- **RECOGNIZE YOUR CHILD'S READINESS FOR ADVANCING TO NEW FOOD TEXTURES**
Some children are a little slower to develop motor skills, including oral motor skills needed for chewing and swallowing. Foods with mixed textures are typically more difficult as are table foods that require more chewing (meats, vegetables). Children who have negative or scary experiences with foods (choking, gagging, sensory aversions) will learn that eating is not a pleasant activity.
- **USE POSITIVE LANGUAGE WITH CHILDREN WHEN TALKING ABOUT FOOD**
Be aware of your own food preferences and the messages you are sending ("ugh broccoli stinks"). Respect your child's preferences. Mealtimes are to be enjoyable family times for

interacting and sharing the day, not a time to overly focus on your child's eating. Do not pressure, criticize, punish or force your child to eat something they don't want to eat. Children need to explore foods before they are comfortable eating them. This means allowing children to touch and explore foods with their fingers and also allowing them to spit out a food if they decide they are not ready to swallow it. Pressure to "just take a bite" before a child is ready to, undermines trust and doesn't support the child learning about her own body. This is important for healthy eating as children grow and become independent.

- **INVOLVE YOUR CHILD**

Involve your child in food preparation and clean up as soon as they are able to participate. Look at and read books about food, where food comes from and how people prepare and cook food. Let your child help with grocery shopping or help with a vegetable garden.

- **EXPECT YOUR CHILD TO STAY AT THE TABLE FOR A REASONABLE AMOUNT OF TIME**

Fifteen to 30 minutes is appropriate for a young child. Be sure you provide support for sitting with an appropriate size highchair or chair with foot supports. Allow your young child to leave the table when done eating.

- **TODDLERS ARE NATURALLY PICKY EATERS**

This is the age of neophobia, when new things are perceived with suspicion. It is a time when children are increasingly active, growing more slowly and also developing a greater sense of independence. This is when parents run into battles as the toddler resists spoon feeding and wants to do things themselves, even if they don't yet have the skills. Finger foods are popular at this time and messes are typical. Eating becomes highly variable day-to-day and across the week. Remember to keep presenting opportunities and stick to your routines as much as possible without becoming rigid or inflexible.

- **WHEN AND WHAT TO DRINK**

Limit juice to 4 ounces daily and blend with water to dilute to reduce sugar. Offer water between meal/snack times. Present drink at mealtimes (three to four ounces). Expect your child to transition from breast or bottle to cup between 12-15 months. Start presenting the cup earlier at mealtimes for a sip so child becomes used to the cup and learns skills for cup drinking.

- **AVOID USING DESSERT AT A REWARD FOR EATING OTHER FOODS**

While this might work in the short term, it makes the dessert much more desirable and doesn't help children learn new skills.

- **MIX UP YOUR MEALS**

It's okay to eat "breakfast" foods for dinner. When children are learning to eat, dinner is the most difficult meal. Everyone is usually more tired and the foods offered tend to be more difficult for children: meat that requires more chewing, cooked vegetables that have stronger smells, mixed textured foods that are more challenging. The sensory environment can be overwhelming to young children, especially if they have sensory sensitivities.

- **ALWAYS INCLUDE A PREFERRED FOOD CHOICE AT EVERY MEAL**

But rotate your child's favorites. Expand preferred textures and foods by changing one thing at a time (for example, a preferred regular applesauce can be paired with a taste of peach flavored applesauce). You can pair a new or non-preferred food with the preferred food, but allow your

child to change his preferred foods (you can show him how). Sometimes just the smallest change will be too big for some children and they then won't eat their preferred foods. Giving control to your child when it comes to what they put in their mouth (or sometimes on their plate) helps to lower stress and anxiety that contributes to feeding challenges for children who have past negative experiences and ongoing challenges with the sensory and motor demands of new foods.

See list of additional resources below.

RESOURCES

CHILDREN'S BOOKS:

- [D.W. The Picky Eater](#) by Marc Brown
- [Eating the Alphabet: Fruits and vegetables from A to Z](#) by Lois Ehlert
- [Food for Thought and Food Play](#) by Joost Elffers and Saxton Freyman
- [Growing Vegetable Soup](#) by Lois Ehlert
- [I will Never, Not Ever, Eat a Tomato](#) by Lauren Child
- [Lunch](#) by Denise Fleming
- [Mommy What Do Carrots Do? : A Children's Book on Food](#) by Judy Tenzyk