

Mealtime Struggles to Mealtime Success

Healthy eating during childhood is very important, as these are “high growth” years for children. Feeding your child can be quite a challenge. It is common for children to be picky eaters, especially toddlers who may try to be more independent at mealtimes. Also, children’s appetites and willingness to accept new foods will change from day to day. Here are some ideas to help you with those meal time struggles.

Problem	Strategies
<p>Refusing to eat meals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer 3 meals and 2 to 3 planned snacks each day. Allow foods at these times only. • Allow 2 to 3 hours from the end of one meal/snack to the start of the next meal or snack. Make snacks small so they will not interfere with mealtime appetite. • Keep mealtimes pleasant. Focus on enjoying the meal rather than how much food is eaten. • Offer a small selection of foods from each food group at meals, including favourites and foods that are not favourites. • Offer finger foods often. They are easier to handle than foods that need to be eaten with utensils. • Eat quiet, relaxed meals at a table in the kitchen or dining room, without distractions such as toys or the TV and radio. • Have meals with your child. Children are more likely to eat foods they see you enjoying. • Allow your child to help plan and make meals when she is ready to help, as this may increase interest in eating. • Allow your child to serve some foods to herself. • Children will usually eat what they are hungry for within 20 to 30 minutes. They will let you know when they have had enough (for example, turns head away, becomes restless, says “I’m done.”). Respect these cues and end the meal. Meals may be as short as a few minutes and should last no longer than 30 minutes.
<p>Refusing to eat new foods</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer a new food at the beginning of the meal when your child is hungry and is more likely to try it. • Offer only one new food at a meal/snack. • Gently encourage your child to try the new food. Respect your child’s decision to like or not like the food. It may take over 15 exposures before a new food is accepted. • Children’s likes and dislikes often change, so offer foods he did not like before from time to time. • Offer the rejected food in a different form, along with a favorite food, at another time. • There is no need to “cater” to your child. Everyone in the family can be offered the same foods.

<p>Child is being “pressured” to eat.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy eating is eating for hunger, not to please a caregiver. • Let your child decide how much she will eat. Her intake can vary from day to day. • Stay calm and do not force your child to eat. Pressuring or forcing your child to eat may result in even more food refusal. Also, children may not eat well if they sense a parent is upset. • Try not to give rewards or praise for eating.
<p>Picky Eating</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try not to become frustrated if your child will eat only a few foods. This is a normal stage of development and will pass. • Offer a variety of healthy foods at meals and snacks, but do not feel you that you need to cook special meals for your child. • Keep food offered simple with age-appropriate portions. Children can become overwhelmed with too large portions or too many choices. • Be a role model. Children learn eating habits from their parents. • Make small changes. For example, if your child likes mashed potatoes, try mashed sweet potatoes. • Avoid trying to persuade or bribe your child to eat. He will likely resist eating any foods you try to persuade him to eat.
<p>Drinking too much juice/milk</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer milk or juice with a planned meal or snack. • Avoid giving milk or juice before a meal or snack. This may decrease your child’s appetite for other foods. • Limit milk to a total of 500 to 750 mL (2–3 cups) per day. • Limit juice to a total of 125 to 250 mL (4–8 oz.) per day. • If your child is thirsty between planned meals and snacks, offer water to drink.
<p>Not eating enough meat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children need smaller meat portions than adults. Two portions a day that are 25 to 50 g (1 to 2 oz.) each, is enough for them. • Offer soft, moist choices such as chicken, fish, stews, hamburger, or thinly sliced roasted meats with a small amount of sauce or gravy. • Meat alternates such as eggs, beans in tomato sauce, cheese, and bean or pea soup are good sources of protein and may be better accepted.
<p>Not eating enough vegetables and fruit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not worry about your child’s intake. Even if your child only eats a few kinds of vegetables and fruit, she can still get all the nutrition needed. • If vegetables are absolutely refused, the nutrients missed can be replaced with a variety of fruit. Vegetables should still be offered, as children’s likes and dislikes can change daily. • Offer vegetables in soups or casseroles, which may be better accepted. Try vegetables in different forms (examples: fresh, frozen, canned). • Include grated vegetables in baked goods (example: grated carrots in muffins). • Cut vegetables and fruits into different shapes. • Offer vegetables or fruit with a dip. • Offer fruit in different forms (examples, fresh, frozen, canned, dried, fruit sauce, in muffins or breads).

Choking

These foods should not be given to children under four years of age as they may cause choking:

- Raw **hard** pieces of vegetable or fruit
- Whole grapes or cherries
- Wieners (unless cut lengthwise into quarters)
- Popcorn
- Whole nuts and seeds
- Hard or chewy candies, suckers
- Snacks using skewers or toothpicks

Have your child sit upright when eating (no walking or running) to decrease the risk of choking.

Nuts, including peanuts, peanut butter, **should not** be given before 12 months of age. This may reduce the chance of food allergy. If there is an immediate family history of allergies, nuts and peanuts **should not** be offered until after age 3. Speak with your doctor.

Peanut butter served alone or on a spoon is a choking hazard and is not recommended.

Fresh/frozen tuna or canned white tuna, and shark and swordfish should be avoided by children under the age of five because of high mercury levels.

Roles of the Parent and Child

When feeding a child, your responsibilities as a parent include:

- choosing and buying nutritious foods
- deciding what foods will be offered
- making and serving meals
- planning the meal times
- serving food in a form your child can handle
- letting your child eat in a way he can master (using fingers, spoon or fork)
- making sure your child's chair is comfortable and at the right level for eating
- keeping family mealtimes pleasant
- helping your child take part in family meals
- sitting at a table and eating with your child at mealtimes to show appropriate behaviour

Parents are not responsible for:

- how much their child eats
- whether their child eats
- how their child's body turns out

(Adapted from *How to Get Your Kid to Eat...But Not too Much*, E. Satter, 1987.)

References

1. Satter, E., (1987). *How to Get Your Kid to Eat...But Not too Much*. Bull Publishing.
2. Satter, E., (2000). *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense*. Bull Publishing.
3. Lansky, V., (1989). *Feed Me! I'm Yours*. Bantam Books.
4. Lambert-Lagace, L., (1990), *Feeding Your Child*. Stoddart.
5. Roberts, S. B. & Heyman, M. B., (1999). *Feeding Your Child for Lifelong Health: Birth Through Age Six*, Bantam Books.

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