

Feeding Kids Right Isn't Always Easy

Tips for Preventing Food Hassles



Feeding Kids — What's Your Role?

While parents are the best judges of **what** children should eat and **when**, children are the best judges of **how much** they should eat.

Here are **five** important feeding jobs for parents and caregivers:

1. Offer a variety of healthful and tasty foods. Be adventurous!
2. Serve meals and snacks on a regular schedule.
3. Make mealtime pleasant.
4. Teach good manners at the table.
5. Set a good example.

Happy encounters with food at any age help set the stage for sensible eating habits throughout life. Handling food and eating situations positively encourages healthful food choices.

This brochure gives helping hints for food and nutrition for young children. For specific advice, talk to your child's pediatrician or a registered dietitian.

Mealtime: Not a Battleground

"Clean your plate."

"No dessert until you eat your vegetables."

"If you behave, you can have a piece of candy."

To parents and caregivers, these phrases probably sound familiar. However, food should be used as nourishment, not as a reward or punishment. In the long run, food bribery usually creates more problems than it solves.

Did You Know That...

...encouraging your child to wash his or her hands thoroughly before meals may help prevent foodborne illness?

Mealtime Is More Than Food

Youngsters are too smart to heed the old saying "Do as I say, not as I do." Children learn by imitating what they see. Adults who eat poorly can't expect their children to eat well. Set a good example by eating meals at regular times and by making healthful and tasty food choices.

Parents and caregivers are "gatekeepers," who control what foods come into the house. Having lots of healthful foods around helps children understand that these food choices are a way of life.

Mealtime is family time. Children learn many things as you eat together. And pleasant social encounters with food help develop good food habits.

Three, Two, One ... Let's Eat!

Prepare children for meals. A five-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.

Consistent food messages encourage children to eat and help prevent arguments over food.

Here are six common childhood eating situations. Try these simple tips to make mealtime a more pleasant experience.

Feeding Challenges...

Food Jags:

Eats one and only one food, meal after meal

Food Strikes:

Refuses to eat what's served, which can lead to "short-order cook syndrome"

"The TV Habit":

Wants to watch TV at mealtime

The Complainer:

Whines or complains about the food served

"The Great American White Food Diet":

Eats only white bread, potatoes, macaroni and milk

Fear of New Foods:

Refuses to try new foods

Feeding Strategies...

Allow the child to eat what he or she wants if the "jag" food is wholesome. Offer other foods at each meal. After a few days, the child likely will try other foods. Don't remove the "jag" food, but offer it as long as the child wants it. Food jags rarely last long enough to cause any harm.

Have bread, rolls or 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. Which is worse, an occasional missed meal or a parent who is a perpetual short-order cook?

Turn off the television. Mealtime TV 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. An occasional meal with TV that the whole family can enjoy is fine.

First ask the child to eat other foods offered at the meal. If the child cannot behave properly, 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.

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 food-group foods. Encourage a taste of red, orange or green foods. Eventually the child will move on to other 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. Don't force children to try new foods.

Try these simple steps:

- Be a smart gatekeeper. Buy a variety of foods you want the child to eat. Be adventurous with food!
- Be flexible. Don't worry if the child skips a meal.

- Be sensible. Set an example by eating a variety of healthful foods yourself.
- Let children make their own food choices from the healthful choices you provide.

Occasional Meal Skipping and Finicky Food Habits Are Okay

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 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 healthful, tasty and nourishing foods. Over time, a child will get everything needed to grow and develop normally. Plenty of food variety and a relaxed, happy 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 nature walk are healthful 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.

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.



The New Food Guide Pyramid

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 to learn about **MyPyramid**.

