

Feeding Preschoolers

Children aged 2 to 5 live in an exciting time of change: their bodies are growing, they're mastering skills, their attitudes are forming. These traits influence the way preschoolers eat. For preschoolers, healthy eating is:

- being curious about new foods and ways of eating them;
- examining the chicken sandwich before they eat it;
- accepting toast only if it is cut in triangles;
- trying only a bite of squash today - maybe more tomorrow;
- drinking milk only if they can pour it into their own glass;
- loving carrots on Tuesday, refusing them on Wednesday;
- insisting that the apple be whole - not in slices;
- wanting a peanut butter sandwich for lunch every day of the week;
- gobbling up the cookies they helped prepare when they are fresh from the oven;
- preferring simple foods they can recognize;
- drinking soup out of a cup.

What are some tips to make the most of mealtime?

- Begin self-feeding with soft finger foods - such as bananas, dry cereals - since these allow for more success and less mess than spoon foods.
- Encourage independence. A child needs time to practice skills. Success helps children feel good about themselves.
- Ignore awkwardness or messiness during feeding-it is part of the learning process. Cleanup for parents may be made easier by putting some newspapers under the child's chair.
- Encourage a child who eats very quickly to slow down by talking between spoonfuls. It also helps if adults eat slowly, use a calm voice, create a relaxed setting, put small amounts of food on the table, or use gentle reminders to chew the food.
- Allow a child to take some responsibility for choosing what to eat and then respect the choice. For example, let your child choose between two vegetables on the table, and once the child has made a choice, express pleasure that your child is eating a vegetable.
- Try not to get angry if your child dumps and drops food over the side of a high chair-this is a normal stage of development. Once the child has learned the skill of dumping and spilling, it becomes a game. This behaviour should not be rewarded by continually picking up the food but instead, after the third time, the food can be taken away. Often, it is a sign the child is full.

- Encourage a child who dislikes vegetables to eat them by calling them something more descriptive and fun. For example, if the child is interested in colours, have the child eat the "green balls" (peas) and "orange circles" (carrots) from a bowl of mixed vegetables. If the child is interested in numbers, count the number of peas or carrots in a spoonful before giving it to the child.
- Encourage toddlers to pick food from the serving plate, so the child can determine how much and what they want to eat. This also helps reduce the child's and parents' frustration during the "no" stage.
- Encourage toddlers to eat a variety of finger foods and spooning foods at a meal. This helps toddlers learn how to use utensils and having finger food make it easier for them to eat some food.
- Avoid watching expectantly while your child eats and talking constantly about eating.

Source: Adapted from Well Beings: A Guide to Health in Child Care (2nd edition)

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

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