

Toddlers and mealtime manners

Toddlers can make quite a mess when they eat. They sometimes spit, throw or squash foods, talk with their mouths full and fidget.

Research indicates that children can understand good manners by the time they are around five years of age, but this doesn't necessarily mean they will eat as you would like them to all the time. The behaviour of children at mealtimes rates as a common source of stress for Australian parents.

Sitting down to eat

Toddlers are curious and energetic, which makes them run around and want to explore. Sitting down for any length of time is an effort for a young child. Some toddlers do most of their eating on the run, refusing to sit down at the table at all.

Apart from being antisocial, eating while running around increases the risk of choking. Suggestions to get your child to sit down at mealtimes include:

- Accept that behaviour changes take time and effort. Be patient and calm.
- Discuss your plan of action with your partner and other carers so that your approaches are consistent.
- Be a good role model. Don't let your child see you walking around the house while eating.
- Establish a predictable mealtime routine to help your child remember that they are required to sit down at an appropriate table without distractions such as TV.
- Turn the television off.
- Don't fight over the issue of sitting down at mealtimes. Concentrate on making mealtimes fun and enjoyable so that your child is more likely to want to stay at the table. For example, involve your child in family discussions.
- Talk about it with your child in a calm and reasonable way, explaining why it is best to sit down when eating. You may need to have this conversation many, many times.
- Tell your child that their meal is over when they leave the table. Take away their plate. If they are hungry later, offer them a healthy snack.
- Be consistent. Insist that snacks are also eaten while sitting down.
- Compliment your child whenever they show the desired behaviour.
- Be realistic about the timing of meals – for example, don't schedule mealtimes for when your child is overtired.

Making a mess

It takes time to develop the fine motor skills required to eat neatly with a knife and fork. Don't assume that your child is deliberately being messy when they eat, since guiding food to the mouth without any spills is tricky for a toddler. Suggestions include:

- Find out about the stages of child development, so that you don't expect too much of your child.
- Plan for the mess by putting a plastic sheet under the highchair.
- Present the foods in easy-to-eat ways, such as cut into strips or fingers.
- Allow your child to eat with their hands rather than a knife and fork.
- Say something like 'food is for eating' or 'are you finished?' if your child throws food.
- Do not pay attention to the food on the floor – pick it up when the meal is finished.

Wasting food

Toddlers tend to play with their food. For example, your child may like to squash foods in their hands, throw food onto the floor, deliberately spit and dribble with their mouths full, or leave the majority of food uneaten on their plate. This can be stressful to parents for three reasons: food costs money, meals take time and effort to prepare, and parents may be concerned their child isn't eating enough.

You may find yourself getting angry with your child for wasting food or worrying about whether they are getting enough to eat. Toddlers are good at picking up on your anxiety. They are also good at recognising their own hunger and fullness signals and, short of illness, will never voluntarily starve themselves.

Suggestions include:

- Don't spend too much time over meal preparation for your toddler.
- Aim to make mealtimes relaxed and enjoyable for everyone in the family.
- Avoid battles with toddlers about food and eating. Remember that a healthy toddler will know when they are full. Check their growth and height charts over a few months for reassurance.
- Your toddler's tummy is much smaller than yours. Offer a variety of small portions on their plate. You are less likely to worry if a couple of banana slices hit the floor rather than the whole fruit. You can always give them more.
- Try using special plates for toddlers, made of non-breakable material, to help prevent food being tipped off easily.
- Don't force your child to finish everything on their plate. It is better to waste a few leftovers than battle with your child or force them to eat when they've had enough.
- Try putting dishes of food centrally on the dinner table and allow your child to serve themselves.
- Have consequences if food is deliberately wasted by older children, such as taking away their plate. Offer them a healthy snack later on if they are hungry.
- Don't try to persuade your child to eat by talking about 'hungry' children in other countries. Your child will not be able to understand.

Good table manners

Suggestions include:

- Involve your child in setting the table.
- Lead by example and show good table manners yourself.
- Your child may feel more inclined to copy your behaviour if you promote them to a 'big' chair rather than their highchair. Give them the same kind of place setting as yours but don't give them sharp cutlery.
- Explain why table manners are important, including the difference between eating a casual meal at home and being at a formal restaurant or grandma's house.
- Point out the advantages of good table manners. For example, it is difficult for your child to make themselves understood if they are talking with their mouth full.
- Remind your child gently when their manners slip, but don't make an issue out of it.

Reward systems

Simple rewards may help to reinforce your child's behaviour. Suggestions include:

- Compliment your child whenever they show good table manners.
- Offer stickers or hand stamps for sitting nicely or showing good manners.
- Don't use lollies, chocolates or desserts as bribes.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Parent Line Tel. 13 22 89
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 9689 1577
- Maternal and Child Health Line, Victoria (24 hours) Tel. 13 22 29

Things to remember

- The behaviour of children at mealtimes is a common source of stress for Australian parents.
- Common toddler behaviours at mealtime may include running around, wasting food and making a mess.
- Strategies include being a good role model, explaining good manners to the child and rewarding appropriate behaviour.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Tweddle Child and Family Health Services

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