
Eating tips for young toddlers

Summary

- Your role as a parent is to decide what and when to offer food, but the child will decide whether or not to eat and how much they'll eat.
 - Toddlers' appetites and food intake can vary daily.
 - New foods may be rejected at first, so be patient and keep offering them.
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Toddlers can eat and enjoy a wide variety of foods and textures. This is the time to encourage your child to enjoy family meals and try a wide range of foods, tastes, flavours and textures.

Toddlers and young children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full. Children will learn to eat what the family eats if they are offered the same food and encouraged to try it. Low-fat or restricted diets are not recommended for toddlers as they may result in poor growth.

Common parental concerns

Picky eating can be common in toddlers. The world has become an exciting place and food may be less important when there are many other things to do. Some other reasons why toddlers' eating patterns change include:

- **Slower growth** – growth slows down in a child's second year. This means toddlers often have smaller appetites and need less food. The amount eaten from day to day can change dramatically. Although it sometimes worries parents, this change is normal and doesn't mean your child is being difficult or is unwell.
- **Grazing and snacking** – toddlers rarely follow a traditional meal pattern. They tend to need small and regular snacks. This suits small tummy sizes and provides the energy to keep moving all day. The amount eaten at mealtimes, in particular the evening meal, may be smaller than parents would like. However, children can balance the amount of food eaten with exactly how much they need if they are given the opportunity to enjoy good foods, and are not forced to overeat or finish all the food on the plate. This means that healthy snacks are important to help provide the energy and nutrition your child needs during the day.
- **Fussy eating** – showing independence is part of normal toddler development and this often includes refusing to eat foods that you offer. Rejecting a food does not always mean the child doesn't like it. If you offer it on another day, they may eat it!

Other common toddler feeding problems

Other common toddler eating behaviour may include:

- Meal-time tantrums and food refusal
- Delay in self-feeding
- Preference for pureed foods or difficulty with chewing
- Overeating
- Reduced intake of food or reliance on drinks.

Let your child decide

Your role as parent of a toddler is to decide what food and when to offer it, but the child decides whether or not to eat and how much they'll eat. Remember that children eat when they're hungry. Children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full. If you insist that your child eats more than they choose to, you are likely to be overriding this natural ability and may encourage future overeating.

Let your child decide whether they will eat and how much they will eat.

Mealtime suggestions for parents

Some suggestions include:

- Be a positive role model by eating a healthy, balanced and varied diet together as a family.
- Serve the same foods as the family eats.
- Remember that toddlers need small meals and regular snacks.
- Don't worry too much – a toddler's appetite and food intake can vary daily.
- Offer small serves and give more if needed.
- Let them tell you they're full and don't force a child to finish all food on their plate.

How to encourage new foods:

- Serve a new food with one your child likes.
- Be patient and keep offering new foods, even if they are rejected at first.
- Assume your child will like new foods.
- Offer new foods in a relaxed environment.
- Don't use food as a reward, pacifier or punishment.

Make mealtimes a positive experience

Mealtimes should be relaxed and happy. Suggestions include:

- Let your child explore food by touching and expect some mess.
- Let children feed themselves and give help if needed.
- Enjoy family meals together at a table, so toddlers can watch and copy others, try the family foods and enjoy company while eating.
- Keep mealtimes relaxed. Don't have too many distractions like the TV on.
- Offer encouragement, but don't argue or force your child to eat.
- Talk pleasantly to your child at mealtimes, not just about food.
- Don't ask your child to eat quickly.

Safety suggestions

To reduce the risk of choking, safety suggestions include:

- Always supervise young children when they are eating.
- Encourage your child to always eat sitting down to prevent falls and reduce the risk of choking.
- Avoid small hard foods such as nuts, raw carrot, hard lollies and popcorn. Offer lightly steamed vegetable sticks instead.

Drinks for toddlers

Offer all drinks to toddlers in a cup. Sometimes children fill up on drinks, particularly sweet ones like juice, and this leaves less room for foods. Suggestions include:

- Offer up to three cups of milk only each day, with water at other times for thirst. Full fat milk should be given up to two years of age and then reduced fat may be given.
- Juice and sweetened drinks are unnecessary.

Professional help may be needed

Many parents worry about their child's eating at some stage, particularly in younger children when food intake and appetite appear to change daily. You should ask for professional help if:

- You have concerns about your child's growth
- Your child is unwell, tired and not eating
- Mealtimes are causing lots of stress and anxiety.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Maternal and Child Health Line (24 hours) Tel. 132 229
- Parent line (24 hours) Tel. 132 289

Things to remember

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- New foods may be rejected at first, so be patient and keep offering them.

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Royal Children's Hospital - Nutrition Department

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