



Feeding Kids Right Isn't Always Easy:

Tips for Preventing Food Hassles

Young children need nutrients from a variety of foods to stay healthy. But what if your child eats only macaroni and cheese or will not eat any vegetables?

Read on for information from the American Academy of Pediatrics on how to encourage positive eating habits and prevent food hassles. If you have specific questions about your child's nutrition, talk with your child's doctor or a registered dietitian.

Face Each Food Challenge One Meal at a Time

The Feeding Challenge	What You Can Try
Food jags: eats only one food, meal after meal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure your child is hungry when mealtime comes. Offer only healthy snacks, and do not offer snacks too close to mealtime. • Let your child eat what he wants if the jag food is healthy. • Offer other foods at each meal before the jag food. • Be patient. After a few days, your child will likely try other foods. Food jags rarely last long enough to cause any harm.
Food strikes: refuses to eat what's served, which can lead to "short-order cook syndrome"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure your child is hungry when mealtime comes. Offer only healthy snacks, and do not offer snacks too close to mealtime. • Have whole-grain bread and rolls as well as fruit available at each meal, so there are usually choices your child likes. You shouldn't prepare separate meals for each child, unless you want to be a short-order cook. • Don't be afraid to let your child go hungry if she won't eat what is served.
"The TV habit": wants to watch TV at mealtime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn off the TV during meals. Watching TV during meals is a distraction that prevents family interaction and interferes with a child's eating. Mealtime is often the only time during the day that families can be together. Remember, cell phone and other digital devices should be put away during mealtimes too.
The complainer: whines or complains about the food served	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If your child whines and complains about the food offered, encourage her to eat what she can. If she continues to whine and complain, have her go to her room or sit quietly away from the table until the meal is finished. She can return and finish her meal only if she promises not to complain. • If your child is hungry and wants to come back to finish eating, let her know it's good to have her rejoin the family. • Avoid letting her take food away from the table to eat, return for dessert, or snack until the next planned mealtime or snack time.
"The great American white food diet": eats only white bread, potatoes, macaroni, and milk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage your child to eat what he can. Do not force your child to eat other foods. Giving more attention to finicky eating habits only reinforces a child's demands to limit foods. • Offer a variety of foods from all the food groups. • Be patient. Eventually your child will move on to other foods.
Fear of new foods: refuses to try new foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model eating and enjoyment of new foods yourself by introducing new foods at each meal. • Encourage your child to allow a small portion of the new food to sit on her plate instead of forcing her to try new foods. • Be patient. It may take many tries before a child is ready to taste a new food...and a lot of tastes before a child likes a new food.

^a Keep dangerous foods from children until 4 years of age or older depending on each child's development and maturity. However, round, firm food, such as hot dogs or grapes, can be served if completely chopped into tiny pieces. Peanut butter and other nut butters should be spread thinly. Choking hazards include hot dogs; hard, gooey, or sticky candy; chewing gum; nuts and seeds; whole grapes; raw vegetables, such as carrot sticks; raw fruit chunks, such as apples; popcorn; chunks of peanut butter or other nut butters; marshmallows; meat sticks/sausages; chunks of meat; and chunks of cheese or string cheese.

How to Encourage Positive Eating Habits

When children learn positive eating habits at a young age, they will make healthy food choices as an adult. Parents can

- **Set a good example.** The best predictor of a child with a healthy weight and lifestyle is parents with a healthy weight who make wise food choices and exercise regularly.
- **Get your child involved in meal planning.** Read recipe books together. Put your child in charge of writing down a grocery list and go shopping together. During trips to the grocery store, you can introduce new foods and also teach your child how to make healthy and nutritious choices. Ask your child to help with measuring out ingredients.
- **Try to serve snacks and meals around the same time each day.**
- **Schedule at least one meal together as a family.** Research suggests that having dinner together as a family on a regular basis has positive effects on the development of children. And time spent together can be fun and bring family members closer. Remember to turn off the TV and put away cell phones and other digital devices.
- **Give your children a 5-minute warning before mealtime.** It will give them a moment to calm down, wash their hands, and get ready to eat. (Encouraging your children to wash their hands thoroughly before meals will help prevent foodborne illness.)
- **Set up mealtime rules.** Children who are anxious, excited, or tired may have trouble settling down to eat. Sometimes a simple “food rules” chart on the refrigerator helps keep things in order. Examples of food rules include come to the table with clean hands, help when asked, and do not comment badly about food served or what others are eating.

Don't forget active play!

Physical activity, along with proper nutrition, promotes lifelong health. Active play is the best exercise for kids! Parents can join their children and have fun while being active too. Some fun activities for parents and kids to do together include playing on swings, riding tricycles or bicycles, jumping rope, flying a kite, making a snowman, swimming, or dancing. The daily recommendation for exercise for children (adults also) is at least 1 hour per day. This takes commitment from parents, but the rewards are time together and better health.

What to Do When Mealtime Is a Hassle: Keep the Big Picture in Mind

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 a 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 healthy, nourishing foods. Be creative! A variety of colors,

kid-friendly shaped foods, and foods arranged on the plate in an appealing manner can entice children to try foods they might otherwise avoid. Provide nutritious snacks to help round out picky eating habits during meals. Over time, a child will get everything needed to grow and develop normally.

Do not force your children to eat. While parents are the best judges of what children should eat and when, children are the best judges of how much they should eat. Food should be used as nourishment, not a reward or punishment. In the long run, food rewards or bribes usually create more problems than they solve.

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. See *Face Each Food Challenge One Meal at a Time*.

For More Information

American Academy of Pediatrics

www.aap.org and www.HealthyChildren.org

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

www.eatright.org and www.kidseatright.org

US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service

www.fns.usda.gov (includes information on SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] and WIC [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children] benefits)

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