

Eating and Mealtime Problems

What is the concern?

Mealtime is often stressful for parents of toddlers and preschoolers. Young children's appetites decrease while their interest in self-feeding increases. They start to push for independence by wanting to feed themselves, which can be very messy. They might be picky about what foods they will and will not eat. They may want the same food at every meal or eat very slowly. Some children might refuse to come to the table or to stay at the table until they are done eating. It may seem that they are not eating enough or that they do not eat a large enough variety of food.

Often these problems are short-lived and are caused by normal changes in appetite that occur at this age. Sometimes these problems arise when there are changes in the child's normal routine, such as eating earlier or later than usual, or if the child becomes sick.

Why do children have problems with eating and at mealtime?

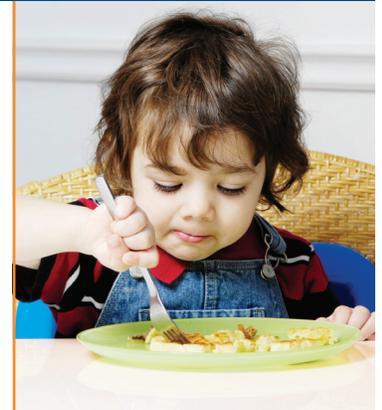
Problems at mealtime occur because the amount of food children eat changes so much over the first 3 years of life.

- By 8 months of age, children begin to show interest in feeding themselves, for example, by reaching for the spoon.
- Between 12 and 24 months, children begin to eat the same things as the rest of their family and begin to develop preferences for certain foods.
- At 18 months, toddlers often learn to feed themselves with a spoon.
- By 24 months they begin to learn more self-control and social skills around eating, like sitting still.
- At 36 months, although food preferences are developing and children are increasing the variety of foods they eat, their appetite may decrease.

All of these changes, which you want to encourage and support, occur when children are becoming more independent and wanting to do things "all by myself!"

How can I prevent problems at mealtime?

- Establish a regular meal and snack schedule to be followed every day to help ensure that your child will be hungry at mealtime.
- Avoid snacks and heavy drinks before mealtime.
- Set time limits on the length of the meal – 20 minutes is typically enough time for a toddler to finish a meal.
- Have meals as a family – have your child eat at the table.
- Turn the TV off during mealtimes.
- Establish a routine for meals and snacks:
 - » Tell your child the meal will be ready in a few minutes.
 - » Set your child's place at the table.
 - » Have everything ready before seating your child at the table with you.



Tips to Remember:

- Keep consistent schedules and routines.
- Use correct portion sizes or allow your child to serve herself.
- Offer praise and attention when they show good eating behavior.
- Ignore minor misbehavior.
- Avoid using food as a reward or consequence.
- You provide food, children decide what and how much to eat.
- Increase variety of foods – try and try again.
- If these suggestions do not work, please talk with your pediatrician for more ideas.

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- » Place your child in appropriate seating, such as a booster seat if needed.
- » Throughout the meal be aware of your child's cues for when she is hungry and full.
- Provide age-appropriate portions and textures.
 - » For young toddlers, harder foods should be mashed or cut into small pieces.
 - » Toddlers and preschoolers should get a variety of nutrients by offering foods from all food groups: breads/grains, vegetables, fruits, milk/dairy, and meat/protein. See MyPyramid for Preschoolers at www.MyPyramid.gov.
 - » In general, portion sizes for fruits, vegetables, starchy vegetables, or grains should be the size of your child's fist. Portions of meats, poultry and fish should be the size of your child's palm.
- Do not insist on a clean plate. Avoid using food as an incentive or punishment, for example *no dessert until you eat your vegetables*.
- Explain rules at the start of the meal.
 - » The child should sit until she is excused from the table.
 - » If appropriate, the child should eat with utensils.
 - » The child should choose from what you have already prepared, not just what she requests.
- Reward good eating behavior by paying attention and praising while they are eating.
 - » Provide attention and praise for things like eating properly with a spoon, trying a new food, or staying seated through the meal.
 - » A special activity can be shared after good meals as a reward.

What should I do if my child is having trouble at mealtimes?

- Don't react to minor behavior problems like being loud, whining, or not eating. Ignore or look away. Be patient—ignoring is difficult and does not work immediately. Your child may continue the inappropriate behavior until he realizes that the appropriate mealtime behaviors are the ones that get your attention.
- Be prepared for messy eating! Expect food to land on the floor and on your child's face. This is a normal part of development.
- Expect that your child will eat slower at some meals.
- Provide sensible consequences for not following mealtime rules, such as the loss of privileges after a meal.
- Increase the variety of food.
 - » Introduce one food at a time.
 - » Continue offering foods that your child has previously refused. It can typically take multiple tries before a child will accept a new food. Don't give up, try and try again.