



Nutrition Know-How

Child Health Specialty Clinics



Managing Children's Mealtime

Eating habits start early, so it's important to teach healthy eating from a young age. Preschoolers and young children can be stubborn, especially at mealtime. Pushing kids to eat some foods can make a picky eater even pickier. It may also make children not like food they could have learned to enjoy on their own. Remember your growing child may eat just a little some days and a lot other days depending on how hungry they are and how fast they are growing. To keep the battle out of meal time, make some parts of a meal your job and leave other choices up to your child.

**Parents choose *when* and *where* kids eat and *what* foods are served.
Kids choose *which* foods and *how much* of each food they want to eat from the choices you give.**

Parents Decide When

Avoid...

Serving food and drinks other than water between snacks and meals. Children who have even a little bit of food in their tummies may not be hungry enough to try new foods. Try to allow 2 hours before meal and snack time so your child can come to the table with a healthy appetite.

Try to...

Have a realistic idea of how long your child can sit at the table. Most young children are only able to sit at the table for 10-15 minutes.

Have a food schedule. Kids need meals or snacks about every 2-4 hours, or 3 meals and 1-2 snacks a day.

Parents Decide Where

Avoid...

Distractions at mealtime. Turn off the TV, phones, and games. This is time set aside for the family.

Keeping your child at the table once they are done eating. This includes when they start to misbehave, throw food, or get down from the table and begin running around. These behaviors mean your child is not that hungry.

Try to...

Remember family meals can happen any place. This includes picnics and other places you can eat together.

Calmly let your child know the meal has ended if they come back for more food. Tell them they will have another chance to eat soon.

Parents Decide What

Avoid...

Making different food for each member of the family. Being a short order cook takes more time, money and energy while providing fewer chances for your family to learn to like new foods.

Try to...

Serve 4-5 foods at each meal, including all the food groups. Make sure each member of the family has at least one food on the table they like. This way, they can fill up on that food without feeling pressure to try a new or disliked food. Instead, they can learn to like that food when their minds, eyes, and taste buds are ready.



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Kids Decide Which Foods and How Much

Avoid...

Struggling with kids about food or meals. Kids pressured to eat more of some foods like fruits and veggies often eat less of those foods and become pickier eaters. Kids pressured to eat less usually eat more.

Making food a reward. For example try not make your child "earn" their dessert or take 3 bites of corn before eating their pizza. This makes mealtime stressful and teaches kids to think some foods are better than others.

Try to...

Help kids serve themselves and eat as much or as little of each food as they are hungry for. Only your child knows how full their tummy is.

If you plan to have dessert, try giving everyone a single serving with the rest of the meal.

Other Mealtime Tips

Avoid...

Calling a child a "picky eater" or "over eater."
Everyone has their own eating habits. Let your child know it's okay to have likes and dislikes.

Labeling foods. All foods fit into a healthy diet. Calling a food "good" or "healthy" can makes kids less likely to try it. On the other hand, a food that is "bad" or "unhealthy" might make a child want to eat it that much more.

Talking about weight or dieting. Children can pick up on these negative ideas and feel pressure about eating. Studies show focus on a child's weight and eating habits can actually cause them to gain more weight and feel worse about themselves.

Try to...

Teach good manners. When kids don't like a food, coach them to say "no thank you" instead of "yuck!"

Be a role model and be positive about food and weight. Serve healthy foods, new foods, even treats, and model healthy physical activity. Your child is likely to follow your healthy habits.

Use your time to talk about the foods you're eating and how each member of the family spent their day. Ask what they learned, or what their favorite part of the day was.