

Young Children and Nutrition

Food and nutrition can look very different from family to family. There are many ways to meet your child's nutritional needs, and we hope this resource will help guide you and your child in making nutritious choices!

Two important goals when it comes to young children and nutrition are first, to make sure they are getting all of the nutrients they need, and second, to help them gain the lifelong ability to make decisions about what they eat based on how their bodies *feel*. Practicing this skill early helps your child to become more mindful when eating, and to listen to what their body is telling them it needs. This awareness will help your child pay attention to when they are full and use that feeling to decide when to stop eating, as opposed to focusing on the task of eating everything they are served. Tasking a child with finishing their servings moves the focus of meal times from nourishment to behavior, and can complicate your child's relationship with food.

Getting Started

We recommend involving your child in as many steps of the process as possible, including creating a shopping list, shopping with you, preparing and cooking food, and setting the table. When children are able to participate in this process, it promotes their ownership of and investment in their meals. This, in turn, will get them more excited and engaged in what they are about to eat! You can support such investment even in infants by giving them a spoon to hold as they are being fed. Encouraging your child to feed themselves with safe finger-foods and child size utensils will give them the sense of control and independence that all children are seeking.

Introducing New Foods

Introducing new foods to your child can include more than chewing and swallowing!

Encourage your child to explore the food with all of their senses by asking them questions like: "What does it feel like?" or "How does it sound when you bite it?"

Remember that it can take 10-15 exposures for your child to become accustomed to a new food, so don't give up after the first few tries!

You can prepare the same food a different way each time to give your child a variety of experiences with the food. You can also involve children in the various preparation processes. This is a great way for your children to gain comfort with food before taking a bite.

Try presenting new foods in a variety of ways.

Cut food into different shapes, or serve it in an intriguing arrangement. Children can even help you design the presentation of food, even if they are not eating it.

When giving your child a new food, try not to put too much of it on their plate.

This may overwhelm your child and make them less likely to try the new food.





Supporting “Picky Eaters”

Having a child that is selective about what they eat can be stressful for families, and no one wants to feel like they are a short-order cook making a separate meal for each family member!

Let’s take a look at some of the reasons why your child may be more resistant to trying new foods, as well as some strategies that can be used to help:

Potential Challenges	Possible Strategies
<p>Sensory Sensitivity: Some children—and adults--may shy away from certain foods because of the texture, smell, or appearance.</p>	<p>Support children in becoming comfortable with new foods by allowing them to explore with all of their senses.</p> <p>Try preparing foods in different or new ways, so that children can experience a variety of textures, scents, and appearances.</p>
<p>Temperament: Some children—and adults—are more reluctant to engage in new experiences, and this applies to food as well.</p>	<p>Remember to provide time and space around children’s experiences with new food: they need 10-15 exposures to become comfortable, and some children may need more than that.</p>
<p>Activity Level: For many young children, it can be hard to be expected to sit for long stretches of time, even mealtimes.</p>	<p>Do your best to keep mealtimes short, so it feels less like a battle to keep your child at the table.</p> <p>Keep healthy snacks available, and offer opportunities for snacking in between meal times to be sure your child is getting necessary nutrients.</p>
<p>Desire for Independence: Young children are always seeking independence in and control over their experiences. It may be frustrating to be fed, or not have a choice in what to eat.</p>	<p>Provide more than one choice for your child, and be sure to include some foods you are certain they like alongside other foods.</p> <p>Help your child gain independence by preparing safe finger-foods they can feed themselves, as well as providing child-sized utensils when appropriate.</p>

Talking about Food with your Children

Below are some examples of common phrases that may be problematic in talking with young children about food, and some more appropriate ways to speak about these situations.

Instead of this...	Try this!	Why?
"No more candy because it's bad for you"	"Candy is a <i>sometimes food</i> because it has ingredients that are hard on your body"	Labelling desirable food as "bad" to children can be interpreted by them as "I am bad because I like to eat bad foods"
"If you eat everything on your plate you can have dessert"	Serve dessert as a small portion of the regular meal	Serving the "sometimes food" alongside the "always food" can lessen the appeal of the coveted dessert foods
"If you behave/do this thing you can have a piece of candy or dessert"	Use alternative rewards, such as praising children's efforts, and giving emotional rewards for pro-social behaviors	Children can interpret this as "When I'm good I should be rewarded, and that reward should be food"
"Good job, you finished your meal!"	"You ate all of your food; your body must have really needed it. It's always good to listen to your body and eat more when you are hungry, and stop if you're not"	Children can interpret this kind of praise as "I'm only good if I clean my plate, even if I am not hungry"
"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"	"You did it! What did you notice about that food? Which part do you like the best? Some people might like this, and some people might not."	Children often interpret this as another value judgment, as "I am bad because I was refusing to eat that food". Instead, focus on the concrete aspects of the experience, and emphasize personal preferences.

Sources: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/a-cheat-sheet-for-talking-to-your-kids-about-eating-their-vegetables/2015/12/14/bb9a9a34-9ddd-11e5-8728-1af6af208198_story.html

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/352-healthy-from-the-start>