

Managing Meal Time with Young Children



Feeding Is Parenting - You Each Have A Role

Your role as a parent is to decide:

- What foods to offer
- When to offer these foods
- Where your child will eat

Your child's role is to decide:

- Which foods to eat from what you have offered
- How much to eat

Maintain your roles

If you try to do your child's role, you will likely run into feeding challenges.

Your child is able to regulate their food intake and will eat based on activity level and growth needs. Appetite changes are expected. Whether your child eats a lot, a little or occasionally refuses to eat, allow them to follow their hunger and fullness cues.

If your child is not used to controlling their eating, it could take days or weeks to relearn their feelings of hunger and fullness. Maintaining your role will help the process.

Also, offer food for meals and snacks instead of other reasons, such as like comfort or boredom. For example, if your child gets hurt or is crying, use words and hugs to comfort rather than food. Giving food when they get hurt or upset teaches them to feel better, they should eat.

Pressure

Anything you say or do to “get your child” to eat more or less of something is a form of pressure and will not help. There are two types of pressure.

Negative pressure

This is more recognizable and includes:

- Punishing a child for not eating
- Getting angry or making angry or sad faces
- Force-feeding or reminding them to eat
- Not letting them leave until a certain amount is eaten or trying each food (e.g., one-bite rule)
- Following them around with food after mealtime
- Withholding affection, food or ignoring them
- Saying they are wasting food

Positive pressure

This is often less recognizable since it seems playful and encouraging. It includes:

- Offering rewards for eating
- Saying how healthy the food is and how big or strong they will grow if they eat it
- Putting on the TV or phone if they eat or distracting them to eat
- Telling a child they are good for eating all their food or trying a new food
- Making a game out of eating

Remove the pressure

When you allow your child take control of their eating and remove all types of pressure, you will help them create a positive relationship with food and support their mental well-being, including developing positive self-esteem.

Practical Tips Instead Of Pressure

Example Situation	What You Can Say	What You Can Do
Says <i>"I'm not hungry."</i> or refuses to come to the table	<i>"That's okay. You do not have to eat. Just sit with us for a while."</i>	Have everyone sit at the table for mealtime, whether they eat or not. Enjoy time with each other during family meals.
Wants to leave the table before you are finished eating	<i>"If your tummy is full, you may be excused."</i>	Let your child leave when they are finished eating. 15-20 minutes is often enough time to eat. Keep mealtimes no longer than 30 minutes.
Drops or throws food	<i>"If you are no longer hungry you can leave the table."</i> or <i>"When you throw food, it tells me you are done eating."</i>	Give your child one warning and if the unwanted behaviour continues, then mealtime is over for them. Calmly remove them from their seat. Maintain a schedule of a meal or snack every 2½ - 3 hours.
Refuses to eat at dinner, but 30 or 60 minutes later, says <i>"I'm hungry"</i>	<i>"We just finished dinner. It is not time to eat now. You will have to wait until snack time to have something to eat."</i>	Keep 2½ - 3 hours between meals and snack, even when they refuse to eat. Offer water between meals and snacks. Teach your child that they cannot graze on food all day. If you are consistent, your child will learn to eat at mealtime.
Does not eat much or eats a lot at mealtime	Say nothing.	Trust that your child knows how much they need to eat for healthy growth. Allow them to eat the amount they are hungry for.
Just wants to drink milk but not eat throughout the day	<i>"Snack time is coming soon. You can have some milk then."</i>	Offer ½ cup (4 oz or 120 mL) servings of milk in a non-training cup at meal and snack times only. Offering more may lower their appetite for food. Between meals and snacks, offer water.
Says <i>"I don't like this"</i> or <i>"I'm not going to eat this"</i>	<i>"Please say, no thank you."</i> <i>"You don't have to eat it if you don't want to."</i> or <i>"You may choose what to eat from what is on the table."</i>	Teach children how to be polite about refusing food. Include one or two foods your child usually eats and let them eat as much of these foods. If there is no pressure, they will eventually try most foods when they are ready.
Refuses to eat what is offered and asks for something else	<i>"This is what I made for dinner. You don't have to eat it but I am not going to get something else."</i> or <i>"That food is not on the menu tonight. We can plan to have it another day."</i>	Consider but do not cater to your child's favourite foods. Do not make a separate meal or go back to the kitchen to get them something else to eat. The more you cater to your child's likes and dislikes, the pickier they will become.
Cries at the table	<i>"You're crying. I think you might not be feeling good inside. Tell me about it."</i>	Stop eating and validate your child's feelings. Comfort them with a hug and help them to calm themselves. If your child is finished eating, they can leave the table.
Wants to eat the same foods over and over	<i>"I can see you like bananas."</i> and either <i>"We can have a banana with lunch."</i> or <i>"We are not having bananas now, but you can have a banana later with your snack."</i>	Going through phases of eating a certain food is common. You can offer that food along with other foods. Eventually, they will get tired of that food. If you decide that food will not be part of a meal or snack, avoid going back into the kitchen to get it if they refuse to eat.

What You Can Say or Do Instead of Pressure

Type of Pressure	Example Situation	What You Can Do
Praising	<i>“Good girl! You ate the peas.”</i>	<i>“I see you tried the peas.”</i> or <i>“What did you think?”</i> Saying they are “good” for trying a food can make them feel bad about themselves if they do not eat it next time.
Bribing or rewarding	<i>“If you try this, we will go to the park”</i> or <i>“If you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert.”</i>	<i>“We can have these vegetables again another time. Next time would you like them raw instead of cooked?”</i> Do not offer rewards for eating food. If rewarded with dessert for eating vegetables, the desire for dessert becomes higher. Some children will overeat just to get dessert.
Punishing	<i>“Since you didn’t eat that, we can’t go outside and play.”</i>	Say nothing about what your child eats or does not eat. Punishment for not eating hurts their mental well-being.
Talking about food being very healthy	<i>“These will make you grow big and strong. You want to be strong, don’t you?”</i>	Say nothing and offer food without expectations. Young children cannot understand health messaging. Set a good example by eating it yourself. Keep neutral with food by avoiding classifying foods into “good” and “bad/junk” foods.
Persuading or reminding	<i>“You’ve tried it before.”</i> or <i>“Don’t forget to eat your meat.”</i>	<i>“You don’t have to try it or swallow it if you don’t want to.”</i> (have a napkin so your child can politely spit out the food) or <i>“Do you like that?”</i> These examples allow your child to feel like they have choices. Persuading or reminding makes the food less desirable.
Having rules	<i>“You don’t have to like it, but you have to at least taste it.”</i> (often called the “one-bite rule”)	Avoid food rules since it does not respect your child’s role with feeding. Your child decides what foods to eat, even if it is only one or two of the foods at the meal. New foods can take time.
Scolding or shaming	<i>“You are wasting food.”</i> , <i>“Finish your food like your brother.”</i> or <i>looking disappointed if they don’t eat what you want them to.</i>	Say nothing or avoid comparing. Instead, prepare smaller amounts of food and they will ask for more if they are still hungry. Getting your child to clean their plate is telling them to ignore their hunger and fullness cues.
Being overly positive about how a food tastes	<i>“This is soooooo yummy! You will like it so much too!”</i>	It is fine to say you enjoy what you are eating but being overly positive is a form of pressure

A More Neutral Approach To Food

How you talk to your child about food matters. While some foods have more nutrient value than others, avoid judgment words, such as “good” or “bad”. If a child hears a food is “bad”, they can think they are “bad” if they eat or want it. Call food by its name, rather than another term. For example, call a cookie a “cookie” instead of a “treat” or “junk food”.

Since young children do not have the brain development to choose foods for nutrition, rather than talking about the health of a food, describe how the food looks or feels. For example, “the strawberry is red” or “this soup is warm”.

For more information

Visit www.smdhu.org/ChildHealthyEating

Contact **Health811**, 24 hours, 7 days/week to speak to a registered nurse or registered dietitian, at no cost.

Call **811** or toll free **1-866-797-0000** or live chat at ontario.ca/health811