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# Toddlers & Healthy Eating

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It is common for parents to be concerned about their toddlers eating habits. Some parents worry that their toddlers are eating too little or too much or are becoming fussy with the type of foods they will eat. Parents have an

important job in providing nourishing food to help their children grow healthy and strong.

Children vary in their individual food requirements and there is not one right amount of food children need to grow. A toddler's rate of growth is slower than a baby's. If your child is having fun and has the energy to play and explore the world around them, then your child is growing well.

Mealtime is about much more than food. It is a chance to help your child learn healthy eating habits, and positive eating behaviours.

## Toddler characteristics

- Your toddler will be becoming more mobile and developing greater skills and language abilities. Their increasing independence, drive to explore the world are some of the reasons why parents find feeding their toddler a challenge.
- Toddlers have small tummies, they need to be offered small meals and snacks at regular intervals.
- Toddlers know when they are hungry and full, and will cue/signal their parents with their voices, faces and actions when they are ready to eat, want more or are full.

## At this age for a toddler:

- Interaction with the family during meal times helps develop social skills including mimicking the eating behaviours and patterns of their family.
- They are learning to feed themselves and like to handle and explore their food.
- The world is an interesting place to explore which may mean there is less time for eating and drinking.
- There is a risk of choking if eating while running, playing, laughing or crying.
- They are easily distracted and can only do one thing well at a time.
- They may develop strong likes and dislikes and frequently change their minds about what they like and what they don't like, and tend to choose familiar foods.
- Being wary of new foods is common, but with repeated exposure they will accept most new foods.
- They don't like to wait, therefore they like meal and snack times to be predictable.
- They are tired after a busy day, so the evening meal is not a good time to try something new or have a big meal.
- Teeth for chewing and grinding lumps are still developing. Texture and size of food needs to be consistent with their ability to chew.

## Meal times tips

- Children will eat best in a calm family environment. If a child associates food with fun they are more likely to eat.
- Model a healthy approach to food by sharing with your toddler how much you enjoy eating a variety of healthy foods.
- Praise your child's social behaviour during mealtimes and try not to be focused on the amount they eat.
- Provide several healthy choices during mealtimes, include something your child likes. Keep food simple, for example finger foods such as pieces of fruit or vegetables, to allow your child to handle and explore their food.
- Reduce distractions during mealtime – turn off the television and make mealtimes an opportunity for interacting and sharing.
- Encourage your child to help with simple food preparation or serving their own meal: toddlers will often snack on the food as they help you.

## Things to remember

- If your family normally eat their evening meal late, your toddler may be tired and will need to eat earlier.
- Milk is an important source of many nutrients, particularly calcium, and should be included in your child's diet.

- Calcium can also be found in yoghurt, cheese and milk based custards.
- Children should be offered 2 – 3 serves of calcium rich foods each day.
- Tap water is best to quench thirst.
- Encourage safe eating habits – always get your child to sit down to eat.
- Be realistic about what you expect your toddler to eat.
- Talk with your child, point to and say the names of foods and objects on the table. Also talk about things other than food, i.e. what your child did today.

## Toddlers like attention

- If behaviour is positive – praise.
- If behaviour is disruptive use distractions. or remove them from the table and re-offer once again a short time later.
- Always wash your hands and your toddler's hands before handling food.

## When your toddler won't eat

- Forcing your child to eat usually leads to power struggles. Your child will learn to associate mealtimes as an unpleasant experience.
- Avoid making deals with your child. i.e. just 2 more bites and you can have dessert.

## If Still Concerned

Keeping a record of what your toddler eats for a week can be helpful. You might find:

- They eat more food than you thought they did.
- There is a pattern of too much milk or juice that is decreasing their appetite.
- Too many snack foods are being allowed between meals.



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