

FAQ #3: How can I support and encourage my toddler or preschooler to eat well?



Raising a healthy eater takes years. According to Ellyn Satter, registered dietitian and recognized authority in child nutrition and feeding, "children learn bite-by-bite, food-by-food, and meal-by-meal". The food habits of toddlers and preschoolers are also greatly influenced by parents, other family members, caregivers, and friends. Your child's eating attitude and behaviour in the long term is more important than what he eats on any given day. If his attitudes and behaviours are healthy, he will eat well and get the nutrition he needs as long as nutritious foods are offered and available.

You can help your toddler or preschooler get the nutrition and food satisfaction required if, one meal at a time, you follow the rituals of healthy meal planning. A meal should be balanced with foods from each food group; grain products, vegetables & fruit, milk products, and meat & alternatives. Snacks should include foods from at least two different food groups. Water should also be included as the choice of beverage when children are thirsty rather than sugary drinks and juice. If your child has feeding issues such as refusing to eat vegetables, or drinking too much or not enough milk - get help with some **solutions to common feeding issues** or talk to your family doctor or a registered dietitian for assistance.

Occasionally you may serve a meal that doesn't quite measure up nutritionally speaking. You might have a "fast food" dinner or your child might miss out on his vegetables. Unless this is a regular occurrence, this is not a problem. It's your everyday meal planning that has the most impact on your child's nutrition. If you need help fitting healthy eating into your busy lifestyle the Healthy Start for Life - **Eating well Together Meal Planner** can

help. It includes some fast and easy meal suggestions that your preschooler is sure to enjoy.

Offering only the foods children like, even if they are healthy choices (e.g. peanut butter sandwich) does not help the child learn to like and appreciate new foods. Allowing children to eat a limited number of foods also limits their nutrient intake. Some children need to see a "new" food many times before they will try it and accept it. Encourage your child to try a small bite whenever you eat a new food - avoid forcing him or her to eat it as this can reduce acceptance.

Everyone is entitled to food likes and dislikes, and some foods won't appeal to you or your child. Broccoli, for example, may taste bitter to some people and they never learn to enjoy it. Children tend to be more sensitive to tastes and textures than adults. Accept your child's reluctance to eat certain foods and respect their decision after they taste something to say "no thank you" if they really don't like it. Expect the same courtesy from other adults or children at the table.

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To help toddlers and preschoolers eat well:

- Be a good role model by preparing and eating healthy meals.
- Serve a variety of foods that are attractively presented.
- Keep portion sizes small - children can be intimidated by large amounts of food.
- Schedule meals and snacks so that children are hungry when its time to eat (but not too hungry) and let them stop when they are full.
- Avoid using food as a reward or punishment.
- Involve children in planning and preparing meals.

Eat together as a family as often as possible:

- Children who eat meals regularly with their family eat better and have healthier eating habits.
- Cook foods that you and your family generally enjoy and make them taste good! Once your child has been introduced to a variety of foods and textures, experiment with spices, mixtures and sauces. Children like interesting food, even if it is a little challenging at first. Ethnic foods, after all are somebody else's standard fare, and their children learn to like it.
- Provide healthy food choices and encourage children to eat what you eat.
- Serve family-style meals sitting at a table and turn off the TV so you can enjoy your time together.
- Avoid rushing and forcing children to eat.

- Let children decide how much food to eat.
- Talk about the food, where it came from, how it was prepared, and how it makes them feel.
- Let children help prepare the meal, set the table, and clean up.

Parents and caregivers share the responsibility of helping preschoolers eat well and need to plan and serve nutritious balanced meals and snacks at regular times each day.

Helpful Books:

- *Better Food for Kids* by Diana Kalnins, RD and Joanne Saab, RD (The Hospital for Sick Children/Robert Rose Inc., 2002)
- *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense* by Ellyn Satter, RD (Bull Publishing, 2000)
- *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family* by Ellyn Satter, RD (Kelcy Press, 1999)

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