
Toddlers at the Table: Avoiding Power Struggles

Toddlers are learning to navigate their world, communicate, and control some parts of their lives. They don't actually have control over much, but eating is one of the first areas where they will.

Parents can help them enjoy their limited power by giving them some amount of freedom when it comes to choosing foods and eating them.

That's not to say toddlers are deciding what to have for dinner. Parents have the important job of providing the kinds of foods that an active toddler needs. A parent's role is to present healthy foods and let a child decide which ones to eat — or whether to eat at all. Parents can steer a toddler toward healthy eating, but might have to do it in a crafty way.

Here's how to turn common concerns into chances to teach healthy eating habits.

Most Toddlers Are Picky Eaters

Many toddlers express their budding independence through eating — or not eating, as the case may be. So nearly all toddlers could be described as picky eaters. If kids don't like a food, they won't eat it — it's that simple.

Does your toddler want to eat only macaroni and cheese? When a child is stuck on one food, a parent might feel forced to serve that food every day so the child eats something. But eventually the child may tire of that food — and then what?

You choose the foods on your toddler's plate — and you don't have to serve macaroni and cheese daily. If you do, you miss a chance to introduce new foods and increase the number of foods your child is willing to eat. Most of these "food jags" won't last long if parents don't give in to them.

Kids won't starve, but they will learn to be more flexible rather than go hungry. Serve a variety of healthy foods — including known favorites and some new foods — to make up the menu. Your toddler may surprise you one day by eating all of them.

Your toddler doesn't like green beans the first time around? Don't stop serving them. Kids are naturally slow to accept new tastes and textures, so keep reintroducing the beans. Serve a small portion and encourage your child to try a bite without nagging or forcing.

And be sure you're setting a good example! Serve nutritious foods that you like or eat something new so your kids see you enjoying what you're asking them to eat.

Don't Bargain for Bites

You want your child to eat the spinach you serve; your child drops it on the floor. Your well-meaning impulse may be to start talking up nutritious foods, saying how big and strong spinach will make your child. Or you might start bargaining: "If you eat 3 more bites, I'll give you a cookie." The problem is that these tactics don't work in the long run.

Who hasn't used the line about spinach making you strong? But this approach may build dislike for the healthy food rather than acceptance. Keep teaching kids about the benefits of healthy foods, but don't push too much by cheering every bite of spinach your toddler eats or disapproving when they refuse.

For some kids, dinner becomes a negotiation session from the very start, and parents have been using dessert as motivation for decades. But this doesn't encourage healthy eating. Instead it creates the impression that "treats" are more valuable than mealtime food. Foods like candy and cookies are not essential to a child's diet.

Threatening a punishment, much like bribing a child with dessert, won't work in the long run either. It creates a power struggle.

To encourage healthy eating, continue offering your child nutritious choices — and keep the mealtime mood upbeat. Also try these tips:

- **Serve right-sized portions.** Parents often overestimate how much food a child should eat. Especially with foods that aren't yet favorites, a couple of tablespoons is plenty to start with. Small portions are less overwhelming, while bigger portions may encourage overeating.
- **Don't negotiate.** It's fine to encourage kids to "try a bite" but don't fall into the negotiating trap. Prepare and serve healthy meals and let them decide what to eat.
- **Have family meals together.** Set your toddler's place at the family table — it's good for kids of this age to see their parents and siblings eating together and eating healthy foods. Kids eat a more nutritious diet, with more fruits and vegetables, when they regularly have family meals.

Let Kids Feed Themselves

Kids should start finger feeding around 9 months of age and try using utensils by 15–18 months. Provide many opportunities for this, but make sure your toddler eats enough so that it doesn't lead to frustration.

Jump in to help when necessary, but pay attention to hunger cues and signs that your child is full. You can always offer more if your child still seems hungry, but you can't take the food back if you overfeed. When you're controlling the fork or spoon, resist the urge to slip in one more bite. And as your toddler gets the hang of eating, step back and let them take over.

Some parents worry that letting kids feed themselves isn't the best choice. But it gives kids the control that they should have at this age. They need to decide whether to eat, what they will eat, and how much to eat. That's how they learn to recognize the internal cues that tell them when they're hungry and when they're full. Just as important, toddlers need to learn and practice the steps of feeding themselves.

Listen to Your Child

Be alert to what toddlers say through their actions. A child who is building a tower of crackers or dropping carrots on the floor may be telling you they're full. Pushing food on a child who's not hungry may dull the internal cues that help kids know when they've eaten enough.

But this doesn't mean that it's a good idea for kids to eat on-demand all day long. Those who eat all day may not learn what it is like to be hungry or full. That's why set meals and snack times are important.

Kids can manage their hunger when they come to expect that food will be available during set times of the day. If a child chooses not to eat anything at all, simply offer food again at the next meal or snack time.

Can Kids Skip a Meal?

Many toddlers need to eat often — as much as six times a day, including 3 meals and 2–3 snacks. Keep in mind that a food schedule only sets the times that you will offer food to your toddler. Your child may not eat every time you do.

Letting kids skip a meal is tough for many parents because they were raised to clean their plates and not waste food. But kids should be allowed to respond to their own hunger cues, a vital skill when it comes to keeping a healthy weight. That means eating when hungry — and sometimes not eating, even if it's time for Thanksgiving dinner.

Set times for meals and snacks and try to stick to them. A child who skips a meal finds it reassuring to know when to expect the next one. Avoid offering snacks or giving hungry kids cups of milk or juice right before a meal. This can lessen their appetite and make them less willing to try a new food being offered.

Avoid the Junk Food Trap

Toddlers need to eat healthy to get the nutrients their growing bodies need. Candy, potato chips, and other low-nutrient "junk foods" shouldn't be part of their diet because they can crowd out the healthy foods needed. Also, food likes are set early in life, so don't miss chances to help your toddler develop a taste for healthy foods.

Even if your child likes candy or chips, don't feel like you must give in. Kids can't run to the store to buy them, so just don't keep them in the house.

If your toddler asks for candy, say, "We don't have any candy." Then present two healthy snack options to choose from. Even a child who is sad about the lack of candy will still enjoy the sense of control from deciding which healthy snack to eat.

Medically reviewed by: Mary L. Gavin, MD

Date reviewed: January 2021

Note: All information on KidsHealth® is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

© 1995-2023 The Nemours Foundation. All rights reserved.

Images provided by The Nemours Foundation, iStock, Getty Images, Veer, Shutterstock, and Clipart.com.

