

HEALTHY BEGINNINGS

MANAGING MEALTIMES

Helping parents create positive mealtimes

Raising a child who is a good eater means having them join the family meal and learn how to enjoy food.

YOU EACH HAVE A ROLE

Children and adults each have roles for meal and snack times. Maintaining these roles will help your child become a healthy eater.

Your role 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 the foods you have offered
- How much to eat

They may on occasion, choose not to eat at all. Trust your child to eat what they need to grow.

Let your child take control of their eating to support their mental health, including positive self-esteem. Consistently follow these roles and respect your child's hunger and fullness cues.

Trying to control how much and which foods they eat will not help your child become a healthy eater and will create mealtime struggles.



WHAT YOU SAY AND DO MATTERS

Pressure never helps

You have an impact on your child's eating habits. Negative or positive pressure does not help them eat more or less of something.

Negative pressure includes reminding a child to eat, or punishing them for not eating.

Positive (nice) pressure includes offering rewards for eating or saying how big they will grow if they eat.

Anything you say or do to get your child to eat more or less of something is pressure. Any type of pressure will not help your child.

PUBLIC HEALTH

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Changing appetites

Let your child eat as much as they want whether you think it is a little or a lot. Big eaters and small eaters know how much to eat for their own healthy growth.

Changes in how much and what your child eats are normal. What your child loved today might be refused tomorrow.

Food likes and dislikes can change quickly. Children eat based on their activity level and growth needs.

Keep to your role

If you follow your role, your child will learn their feelings of hunger and fullness. Sometimes children eat a lot and other times they choose not to eat at all. Children are able to self-regulate their food intake.

The more you cater to your child's likes and dislikes, the pickier they will become.

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

If you allow your child to say "no" to food, they will be more likely to say "yes."

STRATEGIES TO MANAGE MEALTIMES

- Role model healthy eating
- Eat together at the table as a family often
- Too much milk or juice, including drinking between meals, can affect their appetite. Offer these beverages only at meal or snack time
- Provide a healthy meal or snack every two and a half to three hours
- Do not allow electronics or toys at the table
- Be patient. Patience is better than pressure
- Offer the same food as the rest of the family and modify the texture as needed
- Do not go back to the kitchen to get different food if your child refuses to eat
- Let your child serve themselves. Teach them to take small amounts at first. Tell them they can take more if they are still hungry
- Be neutral when talking about food and eating. It is fine to say you enjoy what you are eating but being overly positive is a form of pressure



IDEAS TO SOLVE COMMON MEALTIME SITUATIONS

The chart below offers ideas to solve mealtime situations and promote positive eating habits. As a reminder:

- Your role is to determine the what, when and where of feeding
- Your child’s role is to determine how much to eat and which foods to eat

What your child does	What you can say	What you can do
Says, “I’m not hungry.” or does not want to come to the table.	“That’s okay. You do not have to eat. Just sit with us for a while.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have everyone join the table during mealtime whether or not they eat. Enjoy time with each other during family meals.
Wants to leave the table before you are finished eating.	“If your tummy is telling you that you are full, you may be excused.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let your child leave when they are finished eating. Usually 15-20 minutes is enough time to eat. Keep mealtimes no longer than 30 minutes.
Drops or throws food.	“If you are no longer hungry you are excused from the table.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore the behaviour. If it continues, give your child one warning and then ask them to leave the table. • Maintain a schedule of a meal or snack every 2 ½ - 3 hours.
Refuses to eat at dinner, but 30 or 60 minutes later says they are hungry.	“We just finished dinner. It is not time to eat now. You will have to wait until snack time to have something to eat.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep a meal and snack routine and do not offer food in between. Only offer water in between meals and snacks. • Teach your child they cannot graze on food all day. Your child will learn to eat during meal and snack times.
Does not eat much or eats a lot at mealtime.	Say nothing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust that your child knows how much they need to eat for healthy growth. • They can remain at the table to be part of the conversation.
Just wants to drink milk but not eat throughout the day.	“Snack time is coming soon. You can have some milk then.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer your child ½ cup (4 oz or 120 mL) servings of milk in a cup at scheduled meal and snack times only. • Your child only needs 2 cups (16 oz or 500 mL) of milk per day. In between, offer water only. Do not offer milk or juice in between.
Says “I don’t like this.” or “I’m not going to eat this.”	<p>“Please say no thank you.”</p> <p>“You may choose what you would like to eat from what is on the table.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At meals, include one or two foods your child usually eats. Let them fill up on these foods if they wish. If there is no pressure, your child will eventually try most foods when they are ready. • Do not make a separate meal or offer something else to eat. Teach children how to be polite about refusing food.
Cries at the table.	“You’re crying. I think you might not be feeling good inside. Tell me about it.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop eating and validate your child’s feelings. Comfort your child with a hug and help your child to calm themselves. If your child is finished eating, they can leave the table.
Wants to eat the same foods over and over.	Say nothing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many children go through phases of eating a certain food for a period of time. Continue to offer that food along with other foods. Eventually, they will get tired of that food.

IDEAS TO SOLVE COMMON TYPES OF PRESSURE

What you might say at the table	What you can do or say instead
<p>Praising After your child tries a new food, you want to recognize it so you say “Good girl for trying the peas.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I see you tried it.” or “What did you think?” • Telling your child she is “good” for trying a food is pressure and can make them feel bad about themselves if they do not eat it the next time.
<p>Bribing or rewarding “If you try this, we will go to the park.” or “If you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We can have these vegetables again another time. Next time would you like them raw instead of cooked?” • Do not reward your child for eating a food. When rewarded with dessert for eating more vegetables, the desire for dessert is higher. Some children will overeat just to get dessert.
<p>Punishing “Since you didn’t eat that, we can’t go outside and play.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say nothing about what your child eats or does not eat. • Punishment for not eating hurts their development.
<p>Talking about food being very healthy “These will make you grow big and strong. You want to be strong don’t you?”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say nothing. Instead, offer the healthy food without expectations and set a good example by eating it yourself.
<p>Persuading or reminding “You’ve tried it before.” or “Don’t forget to eat your meat.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You don’t have to try it or swallow it if you don’t want to.” (provide a napkin so your child can politely spit out the food) • “Do you like that?” • The phrases above allow your child to feel like they are making choices. Persuading or reminding makes the food less desirable to your child.
<p>The one-bite rule “You don’t have to like it, but you do have to take a bite of every food.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This does not respect your child’s role with feeding. Your child decides what foods to eat, even if it means they eat only one or two of the foods on the table. New foods can take time.
<p>Scolding or shaming “You are wasting food.” “Finish your food like your brother.” “If you do not eat everything, I’ll be mad.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare smaller amounts of food. They will ask for more if they are still hungry. • Do not compare children. Each child eats for their own growth. • Getting your child to clean their plate is telling them to ignore their hunger and fullness cues. Allow your child to decide how much to eat.
<p>Comforting with food “I know what will make that boo boo go away - have a little snack.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use words and hugs to comfort children rather than food. Providing a treat when your child is hurt or upset teaches them in order to feel better they should eat.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information and additional nutrition resources, visit york.ca/feedingkids or unlockfood.ca

To speak to a registered dietitian at no cost, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000

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