



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Good Habits for Good Mealtimes

Time to Eat: Building Healthy Habits From the Start

Feeding is one of your most important jobs as a parent. It's how we help our children grow healthy and strong. But mealtimes can be a lot to manage for busy families. Here are 10 ways you can build healthy eating habits with your child, starting early!

1

Meals are about more than food.

They are a time to connect with your child and enjoy each other! Use mealtimes as a chance to ask questions, joke, and be together. Use mealtimes to build connection rather than having your child eat alone.

2

Create routines around mealtime.

Routines let children know what to expect. They help children feel safe and secure. Your baby can begin solids when they are about 6 months old. Set up regular meal and snack times beginning when your child is about 12 months old.

3

Give your child the words they need to connect hunger and eating.

When your child shows they are hungry, you might say: "You're hungry, aren't you? Well then, let's eat!" Or, "You are done eating. It looks like you are full."

4

Offer a few healthy food choices at each meal.

Remember that it's your job to offer a variety of healthy choices at each meal. It's your child's job to decide *what to eat* and *how much to eat*.

5

Toddler tummies are small!

They are about the size of your child's closed fist. Start with small portions. Offer seconds if they ask.



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6

Be a smart snacker.

It's okay to offer a snack in between meals if your child is hungry. Make healthy choices available for them—like applesauce, cucumber slices, string cheese, or Greek yogurt.

7

Remember picky eating is super common!

Hang in there and keep offering small servings of new foods. Your toddler may need to see a new food 10–15 times before they try it. You can also pair a new food with something your toddler really likes (like pairing broccoli with ketchup for dipping).

8

Skip juice or other sweet drinks.

Once children get used to sweet drinks, it can be hard to limit portions or get them to drink water. Offer fresh fruit instead of juice.

9

Be flexible about letting little ones move on from mealtime.

Babies and toddlers can't sit for long. Keep meals short for now.

10

Don't try to force your baby or toddler to eat.

It doesn't work! Trying to make your child eat will only make you both mad. And your child will probably eat less. When children decide how much to eat, they learn when they are full.

Remember, children are born all different sizes and weights. Some grow faster and bigger than others. Some eat more than others. Babies and toddlers can be healthy at many different sizes.

Sometimes parents worry about their child's eating habits. Are they eating too much? Are they eating too little? There is not one right amount of food children need to grow.

Have more questions?

Talk to your baby's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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