

Feeding Toddlers and Young Children

Eating food gives children the energy and nutrition needed to grow, learn, and play. Children learn about food and eating by watching others. Be a positive role model. The eating habits you teach a child in the early years can form a pattern that lasts a lifetime. Try some of the tips in this handout to help children build healthy eating habits.

Make mealtime family time

Mealtimes are a great time for your family to visit and talk. Keep mealtimes pleasant and relaxed. Let children see you enjoying a variety of foods. This will help children try new foods and to learn eating skills.



Children's appetites and willingness to try new foods will change from day to day. This may change depending on how fast they are growing, how active they are, or how they are feeling.

The feeding relationship

The way a parent and child relate to each other around feeding and eating is called the feeding relationship. Parents and children have different roles—these roles help children learn to be healthy eaters.

Parents and caregivers decide:

- **What food and drinks are offered.** Serve the same foods to the whole family. Offer a variety of foods from Canada's food guide.
- **When food and drinks are offered.** Offer 3 meals and 2–3 snacks each day at regular times. When children eat at regular times they are more likely to be ready to eat.
- **Where food and drinks are offered.** Children eat best when they sit comfortably, rather than walking around. Eat together, turn off the TV and put aside phones and electronics.

Children decide:

- **How much to eat** from the choices you've offered. Listen to children when they say "I'm full".
- **Whether to eat** from the choices offered. Children will sometimes eat more at meals or snacks and other times they'll eat less.



Plan regular meal and snack times

Knowing that meals and snacks are at regular times may help children feel safe about eating. They won't worry when their next meal or snack will be served.

- Plan meals and snacks 2–3 hours apart. This will help children feel ready to eat at meals and snacks.
- Allow about 20–30 minutes to eat meals and 10–15 minutes to eat snacks. If the food is not eaten within this time, let your child leave the table.
- If your child asks to eat between regular meals and snacks, offer water and reassure them that they can eat at the next meal or snack time.
- If your child asks to drink between meals and snacks, offer water.

Sometimes new foods take time

Children may not like new foods right away. Offer new foods many times, prepared in different ways. Include foods that your family likes to eat along with new foods. Be patient and let your child explore new foods. They may need to see, touch, smell, and taste a new food many times before eating it. It may take 15 or more tries at different times before a child accepts a new food.



Patience works better than pressure

Offer healthy foods and let children decide how much to eat. Children will be more likely to enjoy new foods and eat well when eating is their own choice. Do not use food to trick, bribe, punish, or reward. Children may have negative feelings about eating if they are pressured.

Let children help

Children may be more likely to try foods they help make. Even young children can help in some way to make a meal. Give them small jobs to do like washing vegetables or mixing a salad.

Children learn by serving themselves

Let children pick which foods to put on the plate from the foods served. Teach them to take small amounts at first. Tell them they can have more if they are still hungry.



Think beyond a single meal or snack

Once in a while a child may eat little or nothing at a meal or snack. This is natural. Over time, children usually adjust what they eat at other meals and snacks.

Common eating habits

You may have concerns about a child’s eating habits. It can be hard to know what to expect from one day to the next. The chart below has some ideas that might help for common eating behaviours. If you still have concerns after trying the ideas in this handout, contact your healthcare provider.

Eating behaviour	Ideas that may help:
Refuses meal or snack	<p>Focus on the meal and time spent together rather than how much food is eaten.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to your child when they say, “I’m full.” Your child’s appetite may change every day. • If your child chooses not to eat, let them know that they can eat at the next regular meal or snack and let them leave the table. • Between meals and snacks, only offer water. Gently remind your child when the next regular meal and snack time is coming.
Won’t try new foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn about new foods together. Your child may need to see, touch, smell, and taste a new food many times before they’ll eat and enjoy it. • Involve your child in buying and preparing new food. • Offer new foods many times, prepared in different ways, with no pressure to eat them. • Offer small amounts of a new food, along with familiar foods. • Let your child decide how much and whether or not to eat from the choices you’ve offered. Respect your child’s decision. • Try new foods when your child is with other children who eat that food.
Only eats 1 or 2 kinds of food for a few days or longer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep offering different kinds of foods on a regular basis. Favourite foods may change from day to day. • Serve the same food to the whole family, not separate meals. This will help your child to learn to eat a variety of foods. • Include 1 or 2 foods your child likes as a part of the family meal.
Won’t eat vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let your child choose a new vegetable and let them help prepare it. • Offer vegetables at meals and snacks. • Offer different types of vegetables many times, prepared in different ways. • Add vegetables to sauces, soups, stews, stir-fries, and casseroles. • Try growing or picking vegetables together.

Eating behaviour	Ideas that may help:
Won't eat meat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer different types of cooked fish, poultry, and lean meat many times, prepared in different ways. • Try soft meats like ground meat or poultry, or dice meat into small cubes to make it easy to chew. Try adding these to soups, stews, or sauce. • Serve meat alternatives such as cooked beans and lentils, tofu, eggs, and peanut or nut butters.
Won't drink milk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer milk in (½ cup) 125 mL servings with meals and snacks. • Help your child make a smoothie using milk and fruit in a blender. • Try milk instead of water in soups and hot cereals.
Drinks too much milk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer (2 cups) 500 mL of milk each day. If children drink more than this they may be too full to eat other foods. • Serve milk in an open cup with meals or snacks. • Offer only water between meals and snacks.
Drinks too much juice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer vegetables or fruit instead of juice. Children do not need to drink juice. • If juice is offered, limit it to (½ cup) 125 mL of 100% juice per day. • If juice is offered, serve it in an open cup at a meal or snack. • Offer only water between meals and snacks. Do not add juice or sweeteners to water as this could lead to cavities.
Meals take a very long time to eat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give your child about 20–30 minutes to eat at meals. • Your child may eat better when they eat with others. • Remove distractions. Turn off the TV and put aside phones and electronics. This helps everyone focus on the meal and each other. Everyone can pay better attention to how hungry or full they are.

For more information

Go to healthyparentshealthychildren.ca for more information about feeding children.

Go to raisingourhealthykids.com for a series of 60–90 second videos on feeding children.

For more support



- Talk to your healthcare team.
- Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete a [self-referral form](#) on ahs.ca/811.
- Visit ahs.ca/nutrition.