

FACTSHEET

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Fussy eating in toddlers

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Toddlers are at a stage where they start to develop a sense of independence.

After the first year, growth and appetite slows down. Toddlers still need a variety of healthy foods to make sure they get adequate nutrition.

Being a toddler is all about exploring and experimenting. Mealtimes are usually messy, as toddlers throw, squash, and play with their food. This is an important and normal part of toddler development.

Choosing and refusing food is one way that children show their independence (and test their parents' patience!)

Managing Toddler Mealtimes

Refer to [Healthy Eating for Toddlers](#) fact sheet.

Not all toddlers will eat the same amount every day – it is normal for them to eat lots one day and little the next.

- As a parent or carer, you are responsible for **WHAT**, **WHEN** and **WHERE** they eat. As long as you provide them with nutritious options, your job is done.
- Your toddler can determine whether they are hungry, and they decide **HOW MUCH** or **WHETHER** they eat at all. Toddlers are very good at regulating what they eat over a period of a few days, so even if they have a small

amount to eat one day, they will usually make up for it later.

WHAT to offer

- Offer a good balance of foods. Aim to include foods from all food groups, across the day (see “healthy eating for toddlers” factsheet for some ideas).
- Serve food in small portions. They can always ask for more. Large portions can be overwhelming.
- Toddlers need to be having family foods and joining in the family mealtime. Don't assume they will dislike any particular food. Parents and other siblings set a good example for toddlers. Eat well, and your child will copy you.
- New foods can be rejected the first few times you offer them. Toddlers will eat what is familiar to them. It may take up to 10 times of offering a food before your child will start to eat it. Keep exposing them to a variety of healthy foods on their plate like the rest of the family. Don't give up!
- Do not prepare a “special” separate meal for your toddler. They will eat if they are hungry.
- Water needs to be the main drink at mealtimes. Milk can be offered after or in between meals. Full cream milk is recommended up to 2 years of age. If your child is growing well, they can have reduced fat milk from 2 years of age.
- Try not to give too much to drink between meals or just before a meal. This can be very filling for small tummies and they won't feel like eating.
- Snacks between meals do not need to be large; this can reduce a toddler's appetite at main meals. Snacks

should be nutritious e.g. fruit, vegetables, or dairy. See **“Snack attack”** fact sheet for more ideas.

- Cordial, soft drinks and fruit juice are high in sugar, and are not recommended for toddlers.

WHEN to eat

- Toddlers thrive on structure. Part of normal family eating is having 3 meals a day, and 2-3 snacks. “Grazing” through the day is not a good habit, as your child will not learn to feel hungry or full.
- Prepare your child for the meal in advance (e.g. “Lunch will be on the table in 5 minutes”). This will give them the chance to finish their play and get ready for eating. It can be useful to have a routine before meals, such as washing their hands then setting the table.
- With set meal and snack times, your child should not be hungry in between. If your child asks for food and it isn't mealtime, make sure they aren't just asking because they are bored, or for the sake of it. Another way to manage this is telling them when the next meal or snack time is (e.g. “dinner will be in about 20 minutes”).
- Give children enough time to eat – they are still learning how to eat. Children will eat most in the first 20-30 minutes of the meal. Try not to have the meal go for longer than this as they can lose interest. If they do not want to eat, say “have you finished eating? If you have, you can get down. You can eat more at the next meal/snack.”

WHERE to eat

- Meals are more enjoyable when the family sits down together at the table. Minimise distractions (e.g. turn off the TV or electronic devices such as iPads).
- Eating at the table helps to contain the mess made at mealtimes.
- It is not a good idea to chase your child with food – it becomes a game to them.

Helpful Tips

A positive approach to food and eating can help you to manage mealtimes.

How much your child eats will depend on how hungry they are.

Learn to trust your child's appetite and help them to know when they are full or still hungry. Try not to worry if only a small amount is eaten. It is best not to react but **stay calm and positive**. Children can sense that their

parents are worried, or fussing over them at the mealtime and it can make eating more stressful.

Some tips for mealtimes:

- Toddlers love to be able to feed themselves, so encourage them to do this. They will need help at times.
- You may need to help with chopping up some challenging textures such as meat.
- Do not force feed – this is very unpleasant for your toddler.
- Don't give extra foods or favourite foods as a “reward” for eating.
- Avoid giving “other foods” if they refuse to eat their meal, especially foods high in fat, sugar and salt just so that ‘they eat something’. They will quickly learn to refuse the healthier foods you offer if they know it will lead to something else. Be confident to say “No” and know that they won't starve if they don't eat the meal you have served.
- Try to keep the meal calm – talk about what happened in everyone's day, rather than focusing on the food being eaten. The most important thing is to keep calm, keep smiling, and make the mealtime as positive as you can.
- Be patient; changing mealtime behaviours takes time.
- Put your child's uneaten food in the fridge in case they say they are hungry later.
- Make foods fun when you can: for example, cut sandwiches into shapes, go to the park for a picnic, or let your child help prepare part of the meal such as arranging salad or fruit pieces.
- If you have healthy food in the pantry, your child will choose to eat it. If there are “unhealthy” foods you don't want them to eat, it's best not to have them in the cupboard. Often it's a case of “out of sight, out of mind”.

My child loves the bottle! How do I stop it?

By the age of one, toddlers need to be drinking from a cup.

Some children stop bottles themselves while others can become quite dependent on them.

Some tips for changing from bottle to cup:

- You need to plan ahead for changing from a bottle, to a sippy cup, to a cup.
- You can tell your child they are “too grown up” for the bottle and get them to pick out a new cup for themselves, or get them to give their bottle away. Be creative and positive!

- By the age of one, children need to have a bedtime routine, which could include: having a bath, cleaning their teeth, having a story then going to sleep.
- Children do not need to be settled to sleep with a bottle as this can lead to dental decay and being dependent on the bottle. This can be a very hard habit to break – so it's best not to start it.

Nutrition tips:

- ✓ Water and milk are the best drinks for your child.
- ✓ Offer up to 3 small glasses of milk per day (600mls max).
- ✓ Avoid giving juice. Encourage your child to eat a piece of fruit instead.
- ✓ Sweet drinks such as cordial or soft drinks are not recommended.

The best way to tell if your child is eating enough is to check they are growing. If you have concerns about your child's growth, discuss this with your doctor or dietitian.

Websites:

The Children's Hospital at Westmead

www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets/

State Government of Victoria

www.health.vic.gov.au/nutrition/child_nutrition/child_nutrition.html

Women's and Children's Hospital (South Australia)

www.wch.sa.gov.au/services/az/other/nutrition/documents/Tucker_for_Toddlers08.pdf

Raising Children Network

www.raisingchildren.net.au/nutrition_fitness/toddlers_nutrition.html

Better Health Channel

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Click on healthy eating and food fact sheets. There are several factsheets available under healthy eating tips.

Ellyn Satter Associates (US site)

www.ellynsatter.com

Dietitians Association of Australia

www.daa.asn.au

Baylor College of Medicine: Children's Nutrition Research Centre (US site)

www.bcm.edu/cnrc/

Books:

Food for under fives – How to develop good eating patterns for your child. Rosemary Stanton, 1999.

Kids Food Health 2 – from toddler to preschool. Dr Patricia McVeagh & Eve Reed, 2001.

A Healthy Start for Kids – Building good eating patterns for life. Sue Thompson, 1995

Child of Mine- Feeding with Love and Good Sense. Ellyn Satter, 2000

Positive Food for Kids. Dr Jenny O'Dea, 2005.

Remember:

- Aim to have set meal and snack times over the day (WHEN).
- It is the parent's job to provide a range of healthy foods (WHAT).
- Meals and snacks need to be enjoyed as a family, at the table with the TV switched off (WHERE).
- It is a child's responsibility to decide HOW MUCH they will eat. Healthy children eat when they are hungry.
- If a child refuses the food that is offered do NOT provide an alternative, wait until the next meal or snack.