

Healthy Mealtime Habits: 2 to 5 Years

For many children in this age group, food takes a backseat to the other wonders of a child's life - running, jumping, exploring. Just when it's time for children to begin eating adult foods in an adult manner, parents often have their hands full just trying to keep a toddler or preschooler sitting at the table!

What can you do to teach your child healthy eating habits and keep mealtimes pleasant and conflict-free? A good sense of humor can help, as can the suggestions below.

Healthy Mealtime Habits

At 2 years old, your child should be sharing conversation and good food with the rest of the family at mealtimes. Three well-balanced meals and two snacks a day should cover his nutritional requirements. The best news of all for Mom and Dad is that your toddler can feed himself. He's also quite adept at drinking from a cup, although you'll still want to opt for the type with a lid to cut back on spills. Your child's ability to feed himself will improve by age 3. By then, he'll be handling a fork well and might be trusted with a lidless cup. After age 3, you can direct your attention toward teaching table manners (don't talk with your mouth full, cut food into small bites, and so on), even though you've been showing your child by example all along.

Continue to be careful with foods your toddler can choke on, such as nuts, hot dogs, whole grapes, hard candies, large mouthfuls of peanut butter, and large pieces of raw vegetables. Chop or cut foods into small pieces, or wait until your child is better at chewing and swallowing. Since children this age are still prone to choke even on "safe" foods, don't leave your child alone while he is eating.

Family Meals

A child age 2 and older can join in the same healthy, well-balanced meals as the rest of the family, provided the child has not shown signs of any food allergies. Now might be a good time to recheck your own eating habits. Don't expect your child to want water with dinner if you're drinking soda. If you turn up your nose at fruits and vegetables, chances are your toddler will, too. For your child's sake, try expanding your food horizons at this time. You can help your toddler or preschooler develop his own good eating habits by:

- buying a variety of healthy foods, including fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain breads and cereals
- allowing your child to choose from the variety of foods you provide
- setting specific times for meals and snacks
- providing a healthy breakfast each morning
- limiting sugary, high-fat snacks and drinks (Not only do they contain little of nutritional value, they leave no room for healthy foods.)
- avoiding adding excessive salt to foods

- encouraging your child to drink water, not just high-calorie fruit juices and empty-calorie sodas
- avoiding caffeinated foods (such as chocolate) and drinks
- sitting down and sharing mealtimes with your child

Wanting the same favorite foods at every meal is common at this age. As your child asserts his growing independence, he may even refuse these favorite foods occasionally, just to show you he can! Don't worry if your toddler or preschooler doesn't seem to have a balanced diet on a daily basis. As long as you keep offering a variety of healthful foods over the course of the week, your child should get the nutrition he needs. You can head off struggles at the table by offering new foods along with a food or two that you know your child likes. That way, you'll know your child will eat something, and the new foods will seem less scary. Provide small, easy-to-handle portions so your child won't be overwhelmed.

As your child grows, you can further encourage good eating habits by involving him in the grocery shopping, allowing him to help prepare and serve food, and getting him to set the table before meals. Continue to encourage your child to try a wide variety of new foods one at a time, but don't get discouraged if he sticks to old favorites. He'll surprise you one day by taking a bite! When introducing new foods, look for signs of allergic reaction. If you notice that your child develops a rash or has trouble breathing after eating any food, call your doctor right away.

Healthy Food Away From Home

Somewhere between ages 2 and 5, your child may start preschool and may begin visiting his friends' homes without you. Play dates with friends can be exciting and fun, especially if the friend's parents aren't as vigilant about sticking with healthy foods as Mom and Dad! Don't fret about the occasional soda or candy bar. Just make sure your child views them as "once-in-a-while" foods. Explain that some foods are better for him than others, and choosing nutritious foods is healthier.

If your child regularly eats snacks or meals at day care or preschool, find out what kinds of foods are served. Make sure the food is nutritious and the meals balanced. If you're not happy with the menus, contact the school or center director and express your concerns. Connect with other like-minded parents if you have trouble getting results yourself. Most parents want healthy foods for their kids and will press for a change if they become aware of problems.

Healthy Food Choices: 2 to 5 Years

The following suggestions for healthy food choices are based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, developed through research by the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Agriculture. The number of servings and serving sizes are intended for children between 2 and 5 years old. When a range is given for a

serving size, the smaller portion is generally appropriate for a 2 or 3 year old, while the larger portion is appropriate for a 4 or 5 year old.

Breads, cereals, rice, and pasta (4-5 or more servings)

Examples of servings:

½ - 1 slice whole-grain bread

½ bagel

½ - ¾ cup unsweetened breakfast cereal

¼ - ½ cup cooked pasta or rice

2-5 whole-grain crackers

Other good choices: cornbread, English muffins, muffins, rice cakes

Vegetables (2 or more servings)

Examples of servings:

¼ - ½ cup cooked vegetables

1/3 - ½ cup raw vegetables

Good choices: asparagus, beets, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, corn, green and red peppers, green beans, kale, peas, potato, pumpkin, squash, sweet potato, tomato, vegetable juices, zucchini

Fruit (2 or more servings)

Examples of servings:

¼ - 1 piece of fruit

¼ - ½ cup cooked fruit

½ cup juice

Good choices: apples, applesauce, apricots, bananas, cantaloupe, fruit cocktail, 100% fruit juices, grapefruit, kiwifruit, nectarines, oranges, peaches, plums, strawberries, watermelon

Dairy products (3-4 servings)

Examples of servings:

¾ cup milk

½ - ¾ ounce low-fat cheese

½ - ¾ cup low-fat yogurt

Other good choices: low-fat cottage cheese, custard, ice milk

Meat, fish, poultry, and legumes (2 or 3 servings)

Examples of servings:

1-2 ounces lean meat, fish, poultry, or tofu

1 egg

¼ cup cooked dried beans

1-2 tbsp peanut butter

Other good choices: shellfish, dried peas, lentils, reduced-fat cold cuts

Facts on Fat

Children younger than age 2 need as much as 50% of their daily calories from fat for healthy growth and brain development. After age 2, up to 30% of calories should be derived from fat. Once your child is 2 or 3 years old, you can start reducing dietary fat by:

switching from whole milk to low-fat or nonfat milk
serving more fish and poultry and cutting back on red meat
removing the skin from poultry and trimming fat from meats
reducing butter and margarine use
using low-fat cooking methods such as baking, broiling, grilling, poaching, and steaming
serving fiber-rich foods, including whole-grain breads, cereals, dried peas and beans, fruits, and vegetables

Facts on Fiber

Fiber becomes important in your child's diet after age 3. Dietary fiber may play a role in reducing the chances of heart disease and cancer later in life. If you follow the suggestions on fruit and vegetables servings each day, and you make sure to buy only whole-grain breads and cereals, you'll be well on the way toward helping your child develop good eating habits he'll continue through his life.

You can boost fiber by serving fresh salad with your meals, adding oat or wheat bran to any baked goods you make, and offering legumes such as chickpeas, lentils, and kidney beans at least once a week. If you think that your child isn't getting much fiber, be sure to increase his fiber intake gradually, since excessive fiber can cause painful bloating and gas. Don't forget to have kids drink plenty of water each day as well, since liquid intake can help reduce the chances of fiber-related intestinal distress. Be aware that excessive fiber intake can interfere with the body's absorption of crucial vitamins and minerals.

Calcium Counts

Making sure your toddler or preschooler gets enough calcium should be another priority. Sufficient calcium now can mean stronger, healthier bones for your child later. Children ages 1 to 3 require 500 milligrams of calcium each day; from age 4 to age 8, the requirement is 800 milligrams each day. After age 8, the requirement jumps to 1,300 milligrams per day. You can meet these guidelines by offering your children good sources of calcium such as: low-fat or nonfat milk, low-fat or nonfat yogurt, low-fat cheese, tofu, salmon (with bones), calcium-fortified fruit juices, ice cream (occasionally)

Taming the Sweet Tooth

Almost everyone has a sweet tooth, and that attraction to sweets can make it difficult to keep toddlers and preschoolers from choosing candy, cookies, and cakes over healthier fare. You can't do much to take the sweet tooth out of the kid, but you can keep sweets out of your pantry. Children who feast on sugary foods wind up with little appetite for better food choices, so let sweets be a "once-in-a-while" snack. This way you'll help your child develop a taste for other foods.

If, like most kids, your child loves cereals, make sure to buy unsweetened varieties and sweeten them up with slices of fruit or raisins. At some point your child may beg you to buy some high-sugar, low-nutrition cereal. If you give in, "dilute" the sugary cereal with an equal amount of low-sugar, whole-grain cereal. Brush up on ways to sweeten foods without adding processed sugar. Fruit juices, unsweetened applesauce, and prune purees can be used in place of fats and sugars in many recipes.

While you're at it, ditch the caffeine as well. Caffeine doesn't belong in a child's diet. Since it's a stimulant, it can interfere with your child's concentration and ability to sleep

well. Avoid soft drinks and iced tea, since these can contain large quantities of caffeine.

Remember to keep snack time healthful. Provide attractive, nutritious alternatives to high-calorie, low-nutrition packaged snack foods. A snack can be a little bit of a leftover meal or half a sandwich. Children love finger foods at snack time, so stock up on: bite-sized pieces of cheese or cheese sticks, cut-up fresh veggies and fruit (beware of choke foods), dried fruits, such as raisins, figs, and prunes, graham crackers and whole-grain crackers, pretzels, frozen fruit juice bars

Nutritional Supplements

If your child is eating a variety of healthful foods, he probably doesn't need dietary supplements of any kind. *Iron deficiency* caused by nutritional inadequacy is unusual after age 2. However, if your child rarely eats meat, doesn't like iron-fortified cereals of any kind, and stays away from iron-rich vegetables, he may need additional iron and zinc. To boost your child's intake of iron without supplements, first try to get him to eat some of the following foods each week: liver, beef, dried beans, dried fruit, baked potatoes, oatmeal, iron-fortified cereals. Do not let your toddler or preschooler drink excessive amounts of milk (more than a quart per day). Too much milk can interfere with the absorption of iron and cause intestinal bleeding.

Some parents choose to give their child supplements. If you do, be sure to check labels for proper doses. If you have concerns or questions about vitamin or iron supplements, check with your doctor.

He or she may also recommend a fluoride supplement for your child if you are using a nonfluoridated water supply. Be sure to store supplements well out of your child's reach; excessive amounts of supplements can poison a child.

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From the AAP & AMA

