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Healthy Mealtimes: Feeding Your Baby and Toddler Right from the Start

Physical Health & Nutrition
(https://www.zerotothree.org/issue_area/physical-health-nutrition/?
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Food is at the center of our lives. And it's much more than the fuel that keeps us going. It can be a source of pleasure, celebration, and—sometimes—challenges.

Figuring out how to make sure kids are eating the right things, in the right amounts, can be tricky. Here are some tips for starting healthy eating habits early, without turning mealtime into a battle.

What Does Food Mean to You?

Think about your own experiences, beliefs, and feelings about food. Did you have to stay at the table until you finished your dinner? Were special treats a reward for good behavior? Did family members comment on how much or how little you were eating? Thinking back to what you learned about food and eating as a child helps you choose to do things the same way or differently than your parents did. Some questions to consider:

- What were mealtimes like when you were growing up?
- How did your parents and caregivers respond to your eating habits?
- How do you feel about your eating habits now?
- What are two or three things you want your child to learn about eating?

One Size Doesn't Fit All

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Children are born all different sizes and weights. Some grow faster and bigger than others, and babies and toddlers can be healthy at many different sizes. Parents often worry about their child's eating habits. Is she eating a balanced diet? Is she eating too much? Or too little? *There is not one right amount of food children need to grow.* How much food children need is based on many factors such as their height, activity level, and how quickly their bodies burn calories.

The best way to know if your child is growing well is to talk to your health care provider, who can tell you where your child is on the "growth chart." This is a scale that shows how your child is growing compared to other children of the same age.

What Is Responsive Feeding?

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There are many situations in which parents must be in charge—such as crossing the street or deciding on bed time. But when it comes to eating, it's okay to be more flexible. Responsive feeding is an approach that says it is the parent's job to provide a variety of

healthy foods in age-appropriate servings at mealtimes and snack-times, and it's the child's job to decide what (and how much) to eat. In other words: The parent provides, and the child decides.

Responsive feeding helps kids learn to recognize the signs of when they're hungry or full, which can help prevent obesity. Babies and young children have many signals for letting their caregivers know what their bodies need by using their voices, faces, and actions. Reading your child's signals means watching and listening to him, and trying to understand what his behavior means. Depending on their age, babies and toddlers have different ways of communicating. A 3-month-old might nuzzle the front of his mother's shirt when he's hungry, a 9-month-old may push a spoon away when he's full, and a toddler might use gestures and words to send a message: pointing to the bowl of fruit while saying, "bana."

Responsive feeding helps children to notice, understand, and trust their bodies' cues. This awareness builds healthy eating skills that last a lifetime.

Expect the New Food No's

Parents often feel frustrated about a toddler's rejection of new foods, or the amount of food that may be wasted because "it's green," or "it's bumpy," or "ugh!" The truth is that many children take a long time to adjust to liking new foods. Gently, but frequently, offer new foods—along with foods your child does like—at each meal. Research shows that *children need to be offered a new food 10–15 times before they will eat it.* So, don't give up on new foods. Keep trying, it just takes time.

Mealtime Myths

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There's a lot to remember when preparing meals for a family. But here are some "mealtime myths" that you can give up forever.

- **Forcing your child to eat.** It turns out that forcing usually leads to the child eating less. Forcing also teaches children to ignore their own sense of hunger and fullness, which doesn't lead to healthy eating habits or good self-esteem.

- **Nagging or making deals about food.** Strategies like, "Just two more bites," and "If you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert," will not work in the long run. Children catch on quickly if there are rewards to be won and will soon bargain around many behaviors.
- **Worrying about your child being picky.** Even though many parents worry about their children's food intake, most of them are getting enough nutrition. Ask your health care provider if you are worried about your child's weight, growth, or eating habits (keeping a food diary for a week can help with this conversation).

Remember that meals are about more than just food. They are a time to connect with your child and support his overall development. Turn off the TV, silence the cell phones, and make mealtimes screen-free for everyone. Sit together as a family, and take time to talk together and enjoy one another. This simple mealtime routine helps build strong family relationships, and a healthy relationship with food.

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