



Materials Brought to you by:

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Keeping Meals Positive

1. Do NOT force, pressure, beg, bribe, ask or coerce children to eat, or “sneak” in bites.

Repeat after me: “You don’t have to eat it.”

This is your new mealtime mantra.

Seriously. This is exactly what you say to your child: “That’s fine, you don’t have to eat it. No problem.” And then follow through – make sure you are consistently sending the message that it isn’t a problem. Relax and embrace the message. It will help you AND your child stay positive at meals!

At mealtimes, you have some jobs and your child has some jobs →

To feed your child successfully, you must do your own jobs and let your child do her jobs.

- You decide **what, when** and **where** your child gets to eat.
- Your child decides **how much** and **whether** she eats (of what you make).

Don’t get your jobs mixed up with your child’s jobs.

- If you don’t do your jobs, your child will eat poorly and not behave at the table.
- If you get bossy and try to do his jobs, he will fight back and not eat.

You can’t force your child to eat....so why even try? You’re setting yourself up for a power struggle that you can NEVER win.

2. Keep eating FUN.

Keep things light! Here's some of my favorite ideas:

- Take “dinosaur” or “lion” bites, “kitty cat” and “unicorn” licks, and “mouse” or “deer” sniffs. Pick your favorite animal and let your child pick his! Even better, let your child pick for both of you! Roar, hiss and chomp your way through dinner!
- Get out the cookie cutters and make fun shapes out of sandwiches, cheese slices, apple slices, etc.
- Get creative and think along the lines of the classic “ants on a log” snack (celery + peanut butter + raisins). We like to make banana sailboats at our house – banana slices with peanut butter on top and little apple triangle “sails” stuck to the top. Have fun with it and look to your child’s favorite things for inspiration!
- Think out of the box when it comes to utensils. There’s lots of fun utensils out there, from bulldozer spoons to robot forks to rainbow sporks. But you don’t have to spend money! One of my favorite feeding therapy tools is just plain old **TOOTHPICKS**. Stick 10 toothpicks into 10 bites of food and watch them go crazy over the meal they would have ignored otherwise!
- **INCLUDE YOUR CHILD IN THESE MEAL PREP IDEAS!!** Children are much more likely to eat something they have helped prepare.

NOTE: I am NOT advocating that you spend 30 minutes making every one of your child’s meals a work of art! These are all quick and easy, lemon squeezy. The goal is not to entertain your child – just get out of the box a little bit.

3. Change your definition of a “successful” mealtime.

Change your perspective from QUANTITY to QUALITY.

Here is what a successful mealtime ACTUALLY is: **a positive interaction with food.**

That’s it.

It’s not swallowing food. It’s not “3 more bites,” or “a no thank you bite,” or “finish your dinner,” or “half your sandwich.”

On average, a child needs to **positively interact** with a food 8-12 times before they independently eat it! Wow! Research shows that most parents give up after 5-7 offerings of a food.

You may be thinking: *“Ummmmm so, Miss Emily. What exactly is a ‘positive interaction’? What do you even mean by that?”* Great question! See the “Journey Towards Eating” chart for lots of ideas on how to positive interactions with food.

A positive interaction with food is one that feels good, feels happy, feels unforced and unpressured. It can be stirring, licking, sniffing, touching, tolerating food on his plate, etc.

4. Meet your child where s/he is comfortable and make it your goal to work up to 1-2 steps above that at each meal

Use the attached “Journey Towards Eating” chart to help guide you to the next step of your child’s journey with any specific food. Examples:

- If your child freaks out when you place kale on his plate, your goal is to help them learn to JUST tolerate it on their plate today. That’s it. Not eat it! The next time you put kale on the plate, hopefully they can tolerate it and work toward stirring or touching it. This might feel like a slow process...but it works!
- If your child can tolerate a new/non-preferred food on the plate, but is too nervous to actually eat it, encourage stirring, sniffing, touching or licking. DO NOT ask/direct your child to eat it. Fight that urge. ;)
- Remember: “You don’t have to eat it.”

5. Understand Typical Development.

Understanding how the toddler develops, both physically and cognitively (fancy word for brain development), can help you get a grip on why your toddler behaves the way he does, especially around food and eating.

For the toddler, it is a time of budding independence (separation from you), exploration, limit testing, and understanding self-control. Erik Erikson described toddlerhood as a time of struggle, during which the toddler figures out who he is as an individual (autonomy) and how to control himself.

The drive to understand the world is so strong, it can get in the way of eating.

Also, a toddler and preschooler’s physical growth continues to be steady, but slows down compared to babyhood. Because growth is slower, the toddler appetite shifts, becoming voracious one meal and light or maybe non-existent at another.

Combine those desires for independence, self-control, and exploration with an unpredictable appetite and it’s no wonder your toddler causes you confusion, frustration, and worry! How well your toddler eats from one meal to the next can be as predictable as the roll of a dice.

Some of the most worrisome eating behaviors during toddlerhood are:

- Refusing or being afraid to try new foods (called neophobia).
- Only wanting to eat certain foods or getting stuck on one food for a long period of time (food jags).
- Skipping meals or snacks.

These behaviors are a natural part of toddler development. If you’re not prepared for them, they can test your patience and be the root of negative dynamics at the meal table.

How you respond to this normal behavior is more important than the behavior itself!

6. Just chill out. Seriously.

Don't be over-invested in how well your child eats at a particular meal or snack - the cumulative intake over the course of a week is what matters most. Great meals are often followed by at least a couple disappointing meals.

Watch your responses when your child eats. Overly praising or obvious disappointment with your child's eating behavior may not give you the results you want, like eating enough or eating vegetables. It's best to have a neutral attitude and response when it comes to your child's eating behavior.

Don't sweat the skipped meal. This is just a result of the variable appetite that goes with toddlerhood. Use a structure of 3 scheduled meals and 2-3 scheduled snacks to your advantage. Toddlers need 3 meals and 2-3 snacks each day—if little Johnny skips his morning snack, he will be able to eat again at lunch (or at the other opportune meals and snacks during the day).

Don't interfere with your toddler's eating... by taking over the spoon, wiping his face after each bite, or pushing him to drink more than he wants to. Remember, eating is one of the ways you can support the natural progression to independence that your toddler is trying to achieve...interfering is just...interfering.

7. Be Empathetic

Imagine you are visiting Peru or Vietnam. You're walking down the street and your friend from that country is encouraging you to try her favorite soup. Hmmm. It smells....different. Upon closer inspection, you find some, um, ODD, things floating in the soup. Maybe intestine? Maybe brain. Ugh. You're not sure about this. This is NOT what you are used to eating!

How many times would you have to stir, lick, see, smell or touch this soup before you would feel comfortable putting a BITE in your mouth???

Or – imagine a situation where you had previously gotten VERY ill after eating a specific food. How long would that lingering memory cause you to avoid the food?

This is how your toddler may feel around new or non-preferred foods, or foods they gagged on or struggled with before. Be empathetic. Be kind. Be patient. Take a deep breath.

8. Continue to offer a variety of foods....even if it feels like it's "not working"

Avoid the traps of feeding the same old food everyday just because your toddler will eat it. Eventually, this tactic will become an obstacle to getting your toddler to eat a variety of foods in the long run. Continue to offer new foods and old foods, in different combinations, keeping your toddler comfortable (he recognizes the old standbys) but also challenge him (introducing unfamiliar foods) at the same time.

I suggest:

- 1-3 preferred foods at every meal
- 1-3 new or non-preferred foods at every meal

It's important to be intentional with your structure right from the beginning of the meal so that you stay in control of YOUR job (remember, your job is to decide what, when and where your child eats).

If you only offer new/non-preferred foods at the beginning of the meal, you will be second guessing yourself half way through when your child hasn't eaten ANYTHING – then your child may learn that if they just don't eat for 5 minutes, they get the mac and cheese they wanted at the beginning.

On the contrary, if you only offer preferred foods at the beginning of the meal, your child will not be challenged with those unfamiliar foods often enough, and this will likely lead to a food rut.



EATING

TASTE

- Chews and swallows independently
- Chews, partially swallows
- Chews, swallows with drink
- Bites, chews “x” times & spits out
- Bites pieces, holds in mouth for “x” seconds and spits out
- Bites off pieces & spits out immediately
- Licks lips, tongue licks food

TOUCH

- Tip of tongue, full tongue
- Teeth
- Lips
- Nose, underneath nose
- Chin, cheek
- Top of head
- Chest, shoulder
- Whole hand
- Fingertips, fingerpads

SMELLS

- Leans down or picks up to smell
- Odor directly in front of child
- Odor at table
- Odor in room



INTERACTS WITH

- Uses utensils or container to serve self
- Uses utensils or a container to stir or pour food/drink
- Assists in preparation/set up with food

TOLERATES

- Looks at food when directly in front of child
- Being at the table with the food approximately in front of child
- Being at the table with the food ½ way across the table
- Being at the table with the food on the other side of the table
- Being in the same room

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS EATING