



Tips for Happier Meal Times

Parent/Caregiver Information

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child health

The overall goal for children with eating difficulties is to create positive normal, healthy eating patterns through ...

Structure

Have a routine to meal times, eat in the same room, at the same table. Repetition helps learning. Ideally eat together as a family allowing your child to feed themselves (if able) for at least the first 10 minutes of the meal.

Keep meal times to no more than 20 to 30 minutes.

If your child has not eaten enough of the meal in the first 10 minutes, you can assist your child to eat. You can each have a spoon or fork. Do this in a playful manner; don't push.

Offer drinks half way through and at the end of a meal so your child doesn't fill up on drinks.

Increased stress around meals increases a child's adrenaline levels and reduces appetite.

Postural stability

Helps little bodies and fingers have more control for eating.

- Use a "non slip" mat under your child's bottom
- Have a foot rest - telephone books can be duct taped together
- Use side supports if needed – use rolled up towels
- Have knees over the edge of the chair
- The correct table height is halfway between your child's tummy and chest level



Modelling

Children learn through watching you eat. Enjoy your meals with your children at the table.

Use "DO" language vs. "DON'T".

"DO"

"DO" language tells your child the behaviour you would like.

For example:

- Replace "stop throwing" with, "food stays on the table - if you don't want it, put it up here" or, "push it away".
- Replace "sit down!" with, "chairs are for sitting, not standing - we sit on our bottoms on the chair".

"YOU CAN"

Encourage your child with positive prompts: "YOU CAN" rather than questions like "Can you?"

YOU CAN statements say "I believe in you" and give no opportunity to say no!

For example:

- Instead of "stop screaming" say, "you can use your inside voice".
- "Can you try your peas" becomes "you can try the peas".

Make foods manageable

Prepare foods in a way your child can manage. This might be pureed or small, easy to chew bites, or in easy to hold strips. Never leave a child unattended when eating.

Learning about food

Playing with food is an important part of learning about food.

Explore the food with your child using all the senses.

- What does it smell like? How does it look?
- What does it feel like on your tongue?
- Can you bang it on the table?
- Is it wiggly?
- Does it crush into powder?
- Is it sticky or squishy?
- Does it feel bumpy, or smooth?

Try serving meals at the table for more learning opportunities with food.

Families can use exaggerated mouth movements to “show and tell” your child about how food works in the mouth.

Caregivers need to be good role models for their infants and toddlers. Model chewing, eating and food choices.

When learning about foods – children learn the skills for eating first. Manners come second.

Preventing ‘food jags’

What is a food jag?

This is when a child eats the same food prepared the same way every day or every meal. This can cause them to ‘burn out’ and stop eating that food.

- The best way to prevent food jags is to offer a specific food only every other day.
- Families can manage food jags by changing some physical property about the preferred food EVERY time it is presented within a 48 hour period.
- This means changing the size, shape, colour, texture, temperature or taste each time your child is given his/her preferred food. The JUST noticeable difference is large enough to be noticed but small enough for the child to still eat the food.



For example

Change the shape — use cookie cutters to change the shape of toast and sandwiches or use different sized bowls for serving.

Change the colour — use different coloured plates or cutlery for serving or a drop of food colouring in yoghurt. White or brown breads could be tried.

Change the taste — use sauces, garlic powder, herbs or spices – just a little.

Change the texture — adding real fruit bits like mashed banana or hundreds and thousands to yoghurt or baking a crumbed food instead of frying.

Food Refusal

Repeated food refusal is common and can be frustrating. If this happens, give your child a break from the food for about two weeks. This is usually sufficient time to allow your child to become willing to try the food again.

Meal Time Tips

- Offer 3 meals and 2 to 3 snacks every 2½ to 3 hours during the daytime.
- At every main meal, offer 3 different tastes such as one fruit or vegetable, one protein like egg, cheese, fish or meat and one starch food, like bread, rice, pasta, cracker, muffin etc. Snacks can be used to learn about foods too – it is important to expose children to a variety of foods.
- Offer sweet tastes at the end of the meal, as a part of the meal. Dessert is not a reward for eating. Sweet tastes suppress the appetite more rapidly than any other taste.
- If your child is getting bored or inattentive at a meal, re-engage him/her into eating by offering a small amount of a new food or a previously presented food again.
- Keep the attention of the meal on the food. Avoid watching TV or having toys at the table or within viewing distance. Have only food related items in front of your child. Allowing your child to interact with food at meals, in a fun way, helps to keep a positive focus on food.

Toddlers

Do not force feed toddlers. Up to 2 years of age, its okay to ‘co-feed’. This is when you both have a spoon to feed, as long as the child doesn’t fight it.

