

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 and milk, 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.