

Mealtimes and Picky Eating



Addressing mealtime behaviors

While everyone knows the importance of a well-balanced diet, getting children to sit down and eat for meals can be hard sometimes. If you have concerns about your child's weight, growth, or nutrition, speak with your doctor first. There are also other providers, like mental health providers or nutritionists, who can support children with significant picky eating concerns. Here are some behavioral strategies that may help if your young child has difficulty at mealtimes.



What can I do?

CONSISTENT AND PREDICTABLE MEALS

- Set a **regular schedule** for meals and snacks. Having meals at regular times (like 3 meals per day plus a balanced snack between each meal) can help your child know when to expect to eat and develop a more regular cycle of feeling hungry and full.
- Grazing (eating small amounts throughout the day instead of meals) and drinking calorie-dense liquids like juice or milk can make it hard to tune into hunger cues.
- Create **consistent mealtime routines**. Try to eat meals in the same place (like the dining table).
- Set **clear expectations** for meals. This helps separate what is under your control as a parent (the "what, where, and when" of meals) and what is in your child's control (which parts of the meal they choose to eat, how much they eat). Be **realistic** when setting expectations – for example, young children should not be expected to sit at the table for very long.
- Avoid distractions** like screens at mealtimes, which can make it hard to stay focused on eating or notice when feeling full. Screen time could be a reward for after meals.

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What can I do?

MAKING MEALS ENJOYABLE

- ✓ Give your child **choices** about things they can be in charge of. Your child might enjoy picking out what plates to use or choosing what order to eat their foods in.
- ✓ **Model** eating new foods and enjoying it. If your child wants to try something you're eating, give them lots of praise for trying it.
- ✓ Make eating **fun!** Consider using fun words to describe the foods you're serving or cutting foods into fun shapes to make meals more engaging for your child.
- ✓ **Involve your child** in meal planning or preparation. Consider giving your child a small job to do, like setting the table, and praise them after. Some may also be able to participate in cooking in a developmentally appropriate way (like helping pour or mix ingredients).
- ✓ Serve your child a **wide variety of foods** whenever you can, even if they don't eat them all. Some children need to be presented with the same foods many times over before they are willing to try them, and it's okay if they don't try them right away – they may try it the next time.

USING YOUR ATTENTION WISELY

- ✓ **Avoid talking negatively** about foods. If you make negative comments about foods or mealtimes, your child may also start to think negatively about foods.
- ✓ **Praise** any attempts your child makes at eating or trying new foods, even if it's a small bite. Give lots of positive attention for eating or your child's attempts to try new things. Praise should be specific, like "I love how you ate that broccoli!"
- ✓ Pay **minimal attention to your child's negative statements** about foods. If your child is complaining about a certain food, resist scolding them. Instead, give lots of praise for any steps your child takes toward approaching new foods, and try paying less attention to those negative comments.



How do I get help?

If you need more help, talk to your primary care provider or get support from a mental health provider. To find a mental health provider, call the phone number on the back of your child's insurance card and ask for a list of covered mental health providers in your area. You can also search for providers on your insurance company's website. For support finding resources for housing, food, and more, visit the [Children's National Hospital Community Resources website](#).

- ✓ Scan here for more information about how to find a mental health provider and how to get help in a crisis.



Pediatric **Health** Network

