

Eating

What Is Considered Typical?

Most children will want as much control as possible when it comes to what they eat. Some insist that bread crusts be trimmed off and others want their noodles to be a certain shape. Picky eating is normal. It doesn't mean your child will be a picky eater forever, or that your child isn't getting a balanced diet. Most children eat well over the period of a week, so worrying on Tuesday about the child's refusal to eat anything but cheese slices may be energy wasted. Instead, make sure that mealtimes are enjoyable and that the foods you serve are healthy.

What Strategies Support Successful Eating?

Involving your child in the planning and/or preparing of the meal is one way to create a positive mealtime routine. Young children love to help stir or pour; setting out the placemats and silverware can also be a good job. Once the meal begins, it's important to have enough time and to have a plan for how the meal will end. Determine ahead of time when a child may leave the table and if there are any rules about dessert.

Serving nutritional foods is easier than many people realize. It simply means that the food should have good nutritional value so that if a child eats primarily one type of food on a given day, they will not be eating empty calories. Or if they have a snack close to mealtime, it won't matter so much if they have a lighter-than-normal dinner. Snacks of fruits, vegetables, cheese, meat slices, crackers, and low-sugar cereals are excellent choices.

What Gets in the Way of Successful Eating?

Mealtimes can be difficult if your child won't eat what is served or says they aren't hungry. When your child says they aren't hungry, be sure that whatever snack they filled up on was as nutritious as the meal being offered. If your child refuses to eat what you serve, use a little creativity. Try offering the vegetable both raw and cooked, or serve the pasta with the sauce on the side. Some children may dislike the way the food is prepared or presented, and some children are suspicious of new or combined foods. Instead of a sandwich, offer the bread, slices of meat, cheese, and a piece of tomato on a plate.

Distractions during mealtimes can also keep a child from focusing on eating. Also, some children are sensitive to certain textures, flavors, or temperatures. Figuring out these sensitivities and accommodating them is preferable to having a power struggle at mealtime. If your child does refuse to eat what is served, have a no-cook option available that the child can prepare. Most preschoolers can make their own cheese or sliced turkey sandwich.

Are There Times to Be Concerned?

Some children, due to food sensitivities, food allergies, or physical problems, will have difficulty eating. If these lead to nutritional deficiencies or cause your child to have difficulty maintaining their recommended weight, contact your child's doctor.

Food Sensitivities

There are not always logical reasons for your child's food preferences. Look for patterns in the foods your child avoids. Pay attention to textures, tastes, and temperatures.

Sometimes certain shapes and colors may be preferred or some children won't eat food if it touches other foods. For example, some children don't like milk on their cereal. If that's the case, simply offer the milk in a cup instead.

Nutritional Guidelines

In 2005, the FDA issued new recommendations for healthy diets. Go to www.mypyramid.gov.

Mealtime Battles

Problems sometimes arise when a child is made to eat specific amounts and certain types of foods.

Such rules are often meant to help a child eat right, but they often lead to unproductive power struggles. Since a child controls what goes in their mouth, battles over food are rarely won by the parent.

The key is to make sure that the foods you offer at mealtime and at snack time are nutritious.

