



How To Feed Your Toddler



During the time from 12 months to 3 years, your child keeps getting taller and heavier, but his rapid growth rate slows down [see WHAT IS NORMAL GROWTH?]. He begins exploring with a vengeance, and he shows, at times, a fierce contrariness as he works at becoming a person separate from you. He may eat less now [see IF YOUR TODDLER OR PRESCHOOLER DOESN'T EAT ENOUGH]. That's okay—he knows how much he needs to eat. If you pressure him to eat more, he's likely to resist and eat less. Toddlers would rather exert their independence than eat.

What a toddler is like

Toddlers are *skeptical*: They have to sneak up on new food. They *will* learn to like it, if you let them approach it at their own speed. After many times of seeing it on the table and seeing you eat it, they will taste it—and take it back out again. They'll do that many times, then eventually they will know it well enough so they swallow it—and like it.

Toddlers are *erratic*: What they like one day, they don't the next. They eat a lot one day and hardly anything the next. They don't eat some of everything at a meal like you do—they eat only two or three foods.

Toddlers are *opinionated*: They know what they do and don't want to do. You can stop them from doing what you don't want, like causing a ruckus at mealtime, but you can't get them to do what you *do* want—like eat.

Your child is no longer a baby

If you treat your toddler like you did when he was a baby and try to keep him happy, neither of you will get your needs met. He needs autonomy: control over his own life and his own world. He also needs limits, to reduce the size of his world to what he can handle. *You* need a child who knows how to behave at the table so *you* can have pleasant mealtimes. Your responsibilities to keep him safe and your own life satisfactory will conflict with his need to be a “demon explorer.” You'll have to set limits. In the short run he won't like it, but in the long run he'll be happier—and like you better. Avoid food battles by maintaining a division of responsibility in feeding: You are responsible for *what*

your child is presented to eat, he is responsible for *how much* and even *whether* he eats [see HELPING YOUR CHILD TO EAT WELL]. At the end of the first year and moving into the second year your child moves from being a baby to being a toddler. Then it's important that you also begin to take responsibility for the *when* and *where* of feeding and establish the structure of regular meals and snacks.

Your feeding responsibilities

Do your jobs with feeding, and let your child do his with eating, even when he eats poorly.

- Select and offer a variety of safe, nutritious and reasonably appealing food at meals and snacks [see WHAT TO FEED YOUR TODDLER AND PRESCHOOLER].
- In meal planning, be considerate, but don't cater. Pair familiar with unfamiliar foods, liked with not-so-liked.
- Let your child eat what and as much as he wants from what you have put on the table.
- Don't push food on your child, or he'll play the toddler's favorite game of turning things down and watching you get desperate.
- Regulate the timing of meals and snacks. Don't wait for him to ask for food before you offer it. The time for demand feeding is past. Begin scheduling meals and snacks now. His stomach is small and his energy needs are high, so he needs three meals a day with planned snacks in between. Don't allow panhandling for food or beverages (except water) at other times.
- Present foods in a form your child can handle. Your toddler can eat most food from the family table, but still depends on you to make minor changes in texture so he can be successful—and safe—eating it. He can't chew tough, hard food, and dry food seems to get stuck in his mouth. Smooth, round food can slide down his throat before he chews it and children under age 3 have a higher risk of choking than older children [see FEEDING CHILDREN SAFELY].
- Let him eat in his own way. If your child is allowed to look, feel, mash, and smell to explore food, he's more likely to accept it. However, when exploring becomes simply messing around to get you to react,

it's time to get him down from the table.

- Don't make your child clean his plate. Even adults have a hard time knowing how hungry they are when they serve themselves. Encourage your child to take repeated small helpings—but at times his eyes *will* be bigger than his stomach and he'll waste food.
- Adjust your expectations. To get the vitamins, minerals and proteins they need, toddlers only have to eat $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ the amounts adults do.
- Make family mealtimes pleasant. Don't argue, fight or scold at mealtimes. Talk and pay attention to your toddler, but don't make him the center of attention. Respect his slowness and messiness with eating.
- Eat with your toddler. Don't feed him separately so that you can have peace and quiet for your meal. He needs to be included at the family table. If he says he doesn't want to eat, tell him it's his choice, but that he's to come to the table for a few minutes to keep you company while you eat.
- Help your child pay attention to his eating. He needs to be calm, well-rested, and hungry to eat well. Turn the TV off: It distracts him from eating and interferes with family social time.

Short-order cooking; food jags

Studies show that 70% of parents of toddlers get up from the table and make an alternative when the toddler refuses the first offering. Don't do it. It doesn't work. Not only does it give the toddler the message that he isn't expected to learn, it also plays into the toddler's need for control. What self-respecting toddler wouldn't refuse a meal for the joy of seeing the parent jump up from the table on command, perhaps offering first one then another food for his lordly refusal? When your toddler complains he doesn't like the food on the table, be casual. Say "Oh, okay," or ignore it. Simply have his milk at his place when he arrives (and drink milk—or water—yourself), put some bread on the table so he won't starve, give him some support in getting himself served, keep him company, and let him take care of his eating. Be prepared for the occasional meal—or day—when your toddler eats very little.

Planning meals ahead of time helps you moderate your child's food jags. If you ask, he'll tell you he wants his favorite food. If you don't ask, he'll take his chances like the rest of the family.

Feeding to quell the riot

When your child is a toddler, there is a high risk that he will learn to use food for emotional reasons. Toddlers have a lot of troubles. If you use food to help with those troubles—to solve problems like skinned knees, hurt feelings, or general crankiness—your child will have difficulty telling the difference between whether he is *hungry* or *upset*. In later life he may

continue to eat when he gets upset and have trouble eating the amount he needs. It's tempting to give him a cookie when you want some peace and quiet, but save this "self-defense" feeding for those times when you have *really* had it. Maintaining structure helps a *lot* with avoiding this emotion-based feeding. You won't be as tempted to use food for emotional reasons if you are in the habit of offering food only at meal or snack time.

Struggles for control

To parent a toddler, you must find the middle ground between being permissive and being domineering. Check yourself. You are being too controlling if you make your child:

- Stay at the table to eat his vegetables.
- Clean his plate.
- Eat certain foods before he can have dessert.
- Get by on only three meals a day.

You aren't providing enough structure and limits if you:

- Wait for your child to ask before you offer food.
- Give your child a snack whenever he wants one.
- Let your child stay at the table when he behaves badly.
- Short-order cook for your child.
- Let your child have juice, milk or other beverage except water whenever he wants it.

Getting outside help

Struggles about control are a normal part of this age, but the struggles can go on too long and become destructive. Ask for an appointment with a dietitian or other professional who understands feeding if:

- Your child's growth veers upward or downward abruptly.
- You are making no progress toward having enjoyable, relaxed mealtimes.
- You worry a lot about your child's eating or growth.
- You can't seem to resolve the struggles with his eating.

For more about understanding your toddler and feeding him in a way that he can eat well and grow up to get the body that is right for him, see Ellyn Satter's *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, Bull Publishing, 2000.

For more about preparing family meals and adapting foods to include the youngest eaters at the table, see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, Kelcy Press, 1999.