



If Your Toddler or Preschooler Eats Too Much



Todd was a robust 3-year-old who concerned his parents because he ate so much and thought about food all the time. He demanded big helpings at mealtimes, insisted on seconds and threw a fit when they said no. Even if he managed to wear them down and get more food, he still began begging for snacks as soon as he left the table. His parents were very reluctant to give him as much as he wanted because then he often ate until he looked positively stuffed and uncomfortable.

Todd's parents were told by their health professionals that there was no problem. Todd was healthy and growing consistently. The dietitian calculated his food intake for a week and found that his overall calorie intake was well within the range of what you would expect for a 3-year-old. The dietitian talked with them about menu planning, showed them the Food Guide Pyramid, and reassured them Todd was doing fine. Medically and nutritionally, he *was* fine. However, there was still a problem. That problem was in the feeding relationship. In trying to manage and restrict his eating, Todd's parents were creating the very problem they feared. They were making him food-preoccupied and prone to overeat when he got the chance.

Children know how much they need to eat

Children (and older people as well) have the instinctive ability to eat the right amount of food. At times, children eat large amounts of food—even more than their parents do [see HOW MUCH WILL YOUR TODDLER (or PRESCHOOLER) EAT?]. At other times they eat relatively little. But if a child is growing normally [see WHAT IS NORMAL GROWTH?], it's safe to assume he's eating the right amount for him even though he seems to eat a lot.

Todd's parents were both modest eaters, careful to limit food intake and disciplined about weight control. In contrast, from infancy Todd was robust, enthusiastic and *hungry*. Early on, Todd's parents held back on bottles and solid foods and worried that he would get fat. Now that he was a toddler, limiting Todd's food intake was a lot harder. They tried to hold him down to one helping at mealtime and not give him snacks. Todd begged and pleaded for food, and even sneaked food

out of the cupboard and refrigerator. The more insistent Todd became about getting food, the more afraid his parents became to gratify his seemingly out-of-control appetite.

Parents must give permission to eat

Todd *was* preoccupied with food, but it wasn't because he was a compulsive eater as his parents feared. He was simply afraid he wouldn't get enough to eat. To solve the problem, Todd's parents had to do the opposite of what felt right to them. They had to offer Todd regular meals and snacks and let him eat all he wanted at those times. Moreover, they had to reassure him that he could eat as much as he wanted so he could get over his fear that he would have to go hungry. At first, Todd confirmed their worst fears: he ate like there was no tomorrow. But gradually he began to trust that his parents meant what they said. His desperation about food went away, and he was able to stop eating when he appeared comfortable, not stuffed. Children are very flexible. If parents change the way they do things, children change, too. Todd's parents had been crossing the lines of division of responsibility in feeding. In addition to doing their jobs of having regular meals and snacks, they were doing his jobs of deciding what and how much to eat.

Many of today's parents restrict

Growing out of their concern about childhood obesity, many of today's parents do what Todd's parents did: restrict their child's food intake. Some more-compliant children go along with the restriction, allow themselves to be underfed and grow poorly. That is very serious indeed. A child's first task, after all, is to grow and develop. Without enough food, growth and development in all areas—physical, mental, emotional and social—are compromised. But Todd, like most children, was anything but compliant, and he wasn't about to be underfed. In reality, he did his parents a big favor by refusing to go along with their attempts to underfeed him. His parents in turn were good parents, who persisted in looking for solutions until they solved the problem. If you feel your child eats too much and everything checks out medically and nutritionally, it is

likely you are having difficulty doing your jobs with feeding and trusting your child to do his with eating.

Establish a division of responsibility

As Todd's parents discovered, Todd's food pre-occupation had more to do with *them* than with *him*. The same holds true for your child. To help a food-preoccupied child, you have to establish a division of responsibility in feeding. You have to make yourself responsible for the *what, when* and *where* of feeding, but turn over to your child the *how much* and *whether* of eating.

Have regular meals at regular times. Have meals be your idea; don't wait for your child to ask for food before you feed him.

- Offer a variety of nourishing foods—a main dish, milk, fruit or vegetable, bread, butter or margarine [see MEALS FOR CHILDREN].
- Have food *taste* good, and make sure there is *enough* of it. Sometimes parents make drab food or run out in hopes that their child—and they—will eat less.
- Use fat wisely. Fat carries the flavor in food and makes it taste better. Children need more fat in their diets than adults do in order to fill their caloric needs [see FAT IN YOUR CHILD'S DIET].
- Let your child eat as much or as little as he wants at mealtime.
- Insist that your child do his eating at the table. Once he leaves the table, that's all until the next scheduled food.

Have snacks at planned times during the day.

- Let your child eat as much as he wants [see SNACKS FOR CHILDREN].
- Keep track of the time and offer snacks at regular times.
- Offer the snack even if your child forgets it.
- Offer the snack even if your child hasn't eaten much at mealtime.
- Have your child sit down at the table to eat his snack.

Don't allow panhandling for food or beverages between meals.

- Offer water for thirst.
- Put food away so your child doesn't graze on it.
- Remind your child he can eat at meal or snack time.

Stay out of struggles for control

Your child needs to regulate his own eating by paying attention to his hunger and appetite. Too much interference undermines this self-control. Your child may defer to your directives to please you or fight back to maintain his independence. Either way, he will be depending on you to manage his eating rather than being able to tune in on himself to know whether

he's hungry or full. To eat as much as he needs, he must be able to tune in on himself. You can help him with that by supporting—not managing—his eating. Check yourself. You are being too controlling if you:

- Expect your child to be satisfied with what you portion out.
- Expect him to fill up on vegetables.
- Expect him to get by between meals without snacks.
- Try to curb his eating when he seems really hungry.
- Hesitate to offer certain foods because you are afraid he will overeat on them.

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

- Let him eat where and when he wants.
- Give him free access to the cupboard and refrigerator.
- Get up and make him special food if he doesn't like what's on the table.

Your eating attitudes and behaviors

Your child learns about eating by watching you. If you worry about food, diet a lot, or avoid good-tasting food for fear you will overeat, you aren't showing your child what normal eating is all about. Moreover, you are likely to restrict yourself at times and then eat to make up for it other times (and do the same with your child). Studies show that parents who restrict then overeat have fatter children than parents who don't show such cycling. It could be modeling: children have a harder time listening to their bodies if parents don't listen to theirs. It could be that children learn to eat when they have the opportunity, whether they want it or not, knowing that another time of restriction is coming. You may find that you have to get help with your own eating in order to be able to do a good job feeding your child [see BEING A ROLE MODEL FOR YOUR CHILD'S EATING].

For more about parenting your toddler or preschooler with feeding, see Ellyn Satter's *Child of Mine; Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, Bull Publishing, 2000.

For more about planning and cooking meals that are tasty, attractive and appropriate for the big and little eaters at the table, see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, Kelcy Press, 1999.