



Food: It's more than just eating

Why do children reject food? What eating behavior can be expected from young children (babies, toddlers, preschoolers)? Find out answers to your questions about feeding your child.

Feeding young children is a tough job. Have you ever lovingly made a meal for your child, only to have her push it away and say “yuck”? It can really hurt when this happens. After all, you may feel you’re offering more than just food to your child—you’re offering your love. And when this food is rejected it can sometimes feel like your love and parenting are being rejected as well. This issue of Parents Count gives you some tips for feeding young children.

Why children reject food

The feeding relationship is a partnership right from the very first moment. The job of the adult is to choose a balance of nutritious foods, and when and where to offer the food. It is the child’s responsibility to choose whether or not and how much to eat. When children are offered a variety of foods, they will eat a balanced diet from those choices over the course of a week or so.

There are several reasons why children refuse foods. Many children have difficulty trying new foods and dislike foods that are combined. Often these same children will eat these combined foods after they see others eat them, and the children become familiar with the smell and appearance. Keep serving foods that children have rejected because a “yucky” food from yesterday may become a favorite food today. When introducing a new food, it can also be helpful to serve it with other familiar foods that you know your children already like.

Children also reject food when they feel a need for control in their lives. Giving them more control in simple choices can reduce children’s need to control by refusing food. The best choices are those in which you approve of both options: “Do you want your red or your blue shirt?” or “Do you want to play outside or upstairs?” You can also give children choices about eating. Rather than making something different for each family member, make a simple choice available for children when they don’t want to eat what is on the family menu. You might say, “You can have yogurt or



a peanut butter sandwich.” You can also give them the responsibility to make the sandwich themselves. Even three-year-olds can spread peanut butter and jelly on bread with a plastic knife. Children are less likely to reject food that they have helped to make, so involve your child in tearing lettuce for a salad or washing fruit for a fruit salad.

Offer small portion sizes. This also helps to cut down on the waste of food. Most parents are surprised to learn that a good estimate of portion size is a tablespoon for each year of age. So a portion of peas for a three-year-old is three tablespoons, and four tablespoons for four-year-olds. Encouraging children as early as age two to serve themselves in family style dining with utensils that are sized for small hands will help children to choose appropriate serving sizes.

The eating behavior of young children

Young children eat differently than adults. If you learn what to expect as your child grows, you can help him become a healthy and happy eater throughout his life. Here are some developmental stages to watch for.

Babies and food

Feeding babies is a partnership in which you and your baby can work together. Try to use the baby's signals rather than a clock to time feeding. Watch carefully to see if the baby wants more, and stop when he starts to turn away or he tells you in his own way that he's finished.

Babies often like to squish, squash, and mash their food. This is a messy but important type of exploration. If you can relax and accept the mess, then you and the child can both enjoy mealtime. Use mealtime as a time to talk with babies. Talk about the food and how it feels. While the baby won't learn all of the words right away, talking with her helps her make the connection between words and what she is doing. Remember to wash babies' hands before and after eating because they need to use their own hands as much as possible while eating.

Toddlers and food

Toddlers need to be fed about every two hours. Their stomachs are small, so they need healthy snacks to give them the nutrients they need. During the toddler years children become ready to eat as a group. Sit down with them at a low table. Toddlers often do not want to try new foods and may want to eat the same food over and over again. They often become upset about how food is offered; they may not want the cheese to be on top of the cracker and may even have a temper tantrum when this happens.

As toddlers grow older, their growth slows down, and so does their appetite. Sometimes it may seem like they are not eating enough. Keep offering a good balance of foods, and over the course of a week, children will do a good job of picking a healthy diet for themselves.

Preschoolers and food

Preschoolers also need frequent snacks, and are typically more willing to try new foods. But often a new food is chewed and spit out rather than swallowed. This can be a normal stage in getting to know a new food, and the best way to handle this is to teach the preschooler to spit food out into his napkin. Like toddlers and babies, preschoolers play with their food. Play helps children get to know a new food and is a very important way for children to develop healthy eating. However, playing with food does not mean that children can disturb others with their food play, play with food off their plate, or play with food away from the table. Set some rules: The food must stay on the plate, and the play can't be too messy. If children's play is not appropriate, say, "This tells me that you aren't hungry and that you are finished with your food," then remove the child's plate.

Questions and answers about feeding your child

What can I do when my child wants to do things for himself?

Let him. Preschoolers gain motor skills and a feeling of confidence from pouring their own drinks and serving themselves. It is messier than doing it yourself, but a spill now and again is worth it when you see the pride your child feels when he or she can "do it myself."

How can I teach my child manners?

Try not to remind children constantly of "please" and "thank you." Instead, model it yourself. Nothing teaches the value of saying "thank you" more quickly than having a grown-up thank a child.

Should I insist that my child sit at the table until everyone is finished?

Most young children can't sit for long periods without becoming restless. Also, if your child has finished the meal and is no longer hungry, it is natural to not want to be around food. If you insist that your child stay at the table, he might overeat or play inappropriately with his food. As children grow older, they'll be able to stay at the table longer.