

Basic Information:

Providing your child with a balanced diet is an important part to support their growth and development. When children start restricting the foods that they will eat it can become very worrisome for parents. While it is common that toddlers have a period where they exercise their voice and choice in what is eaten, the goal is that these behaviors do not persist into childhood. The tips below were provided by our Pediatric Therapy Clinic team.



Parent/Caregiver Tips:

- Consistent mealtime routines are important. We recommend defined periods of time when food is available (breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks). Meals are recommended at the table for 15-30 minutes and snacks can be more casual but limit to around 15 minutes. Easy, open access to snacks or cups of milk between times sabotage meals.
- Recommended Toddler portion sizes are small! A toddler breakfast could include 1 egg, ½ piece of toast, and 2 cut strawberries. Presenting a full plate of food to a child can be overwhelming, we recommend starting with less food on a plate and if your child is still hungry, they can ask for more.
- Model the Behavior that you want to see. Parents need to sit with their kids at meals, have lighthearted conversation, and try new things that they are unsure of.
- Develop a plan that works for your family. Feeding struggles did not start overnight. Make slow consistent changes everyday to move towards your families feeding goals.
- If your child reacts to new foods, start by changing a familiar food so it looks different. Cut pizza into squares, use rotini noodles for spaghetti, buy different brands of a food. This change is often noticeable to a child, but not overwhelming.
- Take food out of the packages. Squeeze the pouches into a bowl so your child can see, smell and experience what they are eating. If the pouch has apples, pears, and spinach in it, offer an apple slice in the bowl so your child can understand that apples can be eaten in whole form or a sauce.
- Start small. Add one new food, in a tiny quantity, (one bite of chicken, one carrot coin) item to your child's plate. Their goal is not that they eat the food the first time they see it, but an acceptance that it is on the plate. Maybe they pick it up and hand it to you and say "no thank you" (touching the food), then the next time they can smell it before they hand it to you, and the next time lick/kiss. The goal is to slowly build your child's confidence to explore new foods with their senses.



Tips continued:

- Increase your child's sense of connection and control by them helping plan or prepare a part of the meal. Open up the grocery store ad and talk about the foods that are pictured. Have your child pick one of interest and cut out the picture, add it to the grocery list. Involve your child in the preparation of the food (washing it, cutting it, cooking it) This dish could be served family style at the table for the whole family to explore.
- Expand vocabulary to describe food. Go beyond this is good or bad. Model language to describe the sensory properties of food especially for texture and taste. "The marshmallow was **squishy** in my mouth and **squeaked** when I bit down." "The chip was **crunchy** and **sharp** in my mouth and **loud** when I bit down." Developing vocabulary with commonly eaten foods first and then expanding it to talk about what new foods might feel like or taste like when they try it.
- Managing stress levels for both kids and parents sounds easier than it feels right now. Mealtimes can be stressful! Adding in extra connection through laughter, stories and enjoying shared activities can help decrease attention on the food and increase the connection at the table. Things like listening to music, singing and dancing before you sit at the table have the added boost of calming our bodies when we feel stressed. A stressed, overwhelmed parent trying to help a stressed, overwhelmed child is a recipe for disaster. Don't hesitate to take a break, regroup and remember that you can try it again tomorrow.

Next Steps:

When do you need more help? If your child has an ongoing history of poor weight gain (dropping weight percentiles), has not weaned off of baby foods by 16 months, has an aversion/avoidance to all foods in a specific food group or texture, if your child "falls apart" when presented with new foods, has a food repertoire of less than 20 foods, or any history of a significant choking incident it is recommended that you work with a feeding specialist to support you and your child with your feeding goals.

Additional Resources:

- **Food Chaining: The proven 6-step plan to stop picky eating, solve feeding problems, and expand your child's diet.** *Fraker, C., Fishbein, M., Cox, S., & Walbert, L.
- **How to Get Your Kid to Eat . . . But Not Too Much.** Satter, Ellyn.
- **Serving Sizes for Toddlers:** <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/Serving-Sizes-for-Toddlers.aspx>