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## **“Toddlers at the Table: Avoiding Power Struggles”**

[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

Toddlers are learning to navigate their world, communicate, and exert control over aspects of their lives. They don't actually have control over much, but eating is one of the first areas they will master. Parents can help them enjoy their limited power by giving them appropriate amounts of freedom when it comes to choosing foods and eating them.

That's not to say toddlers are deciding what to have for dinner. Parents have the important job of providing the kinds of foods that an active toddler needs. A parent's role is to present healthy foods and let the child decide which ones to eat - or whether to eat at all. Savvy parents can steer a toddler toward healthy eating, but they may have to do it in a crafty way.

By anticipating problems and offering choices, you can teach your child which behaviors will yield positive results and which ones won't. Read on to see how you can turn some common concerns into opportunities to teach healthy eating habits.

### **Most Toddlers Are Picky Eaters**

Many toddlers express their budding independence through eating - or not eating, as the case may be. So, nearly all toddlers could be described as picky eaters. If kids don't like a food, they won't eat it - no rocket science there.

Does your toddler want to eat only macaroni and cheese? When a child is stuck on one food, a parent might feel forced to serve that food every day so the child eats something. But eventually the child may tire of that food - and then what?

You choose the foods on your toddler's plate - and you don't have to serve macaroni and cheese daily. If you do, you miss an opportunity to introduce new foods and increase the number of those your child is willing to eat. Most "food jags," as they're sometimes called, won't last long if parents don't accommodate them. Children won't starve and they will learn to be more flexible rather than go hungry. Present a variety of healthy foods - including established favorites and some new foods - to make up the menu. Your toddler may surprise you one day by eating all of them.

Your toddler doesn't like green beans the first time around? Don't stop serving them. Children are naturally slow to accept new tastes and textures, and parents may have to present a food 10 to

15 times before they'll finally give it a try. Keep reintroducing the beans without nagging or forcing your child to eat them - just make small portions available so your child can give them another whirl.

And be sure you're setting a good example! Serve nutritious foods that you like so your child will see you enjoying what you're asking him or her to eat.

### **Don't Bargain for Bites**

You want your child to eat the spinach you serve; your child drops it onto the floor. Your well-meaning impulse may be to start talking up nutritious foods, saying how big and strong spinach will make your child. Or you might start bargaining: "Well, if you eat three more bites, I'll give you a cookie." The problem is that these tactics don't work in the long run.

Who hasn't used the line about spinach making you strong? But this cajoling approach may build dislike for the healthy food rather than increase acceptance. And forbidding less nutritious foods may make them more desirable. This doesn't mean you shouldn't teach your child about the benefits of healthy foods, but don't push too much by celebrating every bite of spinach your toddler eats or disapproving when he or she refuses.

For some children, dinner becomes a negotiation session from the very start, and parents have been using dessert as an incentive for decades. But this doesn't encourage healthy eating. Instead it creates the impression that "treats" are more valuable than mealtime food. Foods like candy and cookies are not essential to your child's diet and it is not a deprivation to avoid serving them during the toddler years.

Threatening a punishment, much like bribing a child with dessert, ultimately isn't effective. It creates a power struggle. To encourage healthy eating, continue offering your child an array of nutritious choices - and keep the mealtime mood upbeat. Also try these strategies:

- **Serve right-sized portions.** Parents often overestimate how much food a child should eat. Especially with foods that aren't yet favorites, a couple of tablespoons are plenty to start with. Small portions are less overwhelming for a child, while bigger portions may encourage overeating.
- **Don't negotiate.** It's fine to encourage your child to "try one bite" but don't fall into the negotiating trap. Prepare and serve healthy meals and let your child decide what to eat.
- **Have family meals together.** Set your toddler's place at the family table - it's good for kids of this age to see their parents and siblings eating together and eating the right foods. Children eat a more nutritious diet, with more fruits and vegetables, when they regularly have family meals.
- **Create positive peer pressure.** Toddlers are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables if they see their peers eating them, so look for opportunities where your child can eat healthy with friends at home or at playgroups.

### **Let Kids Feed Themselves**

Your child should start finger feeding around 9 months and try using utensils by 15-18 months. Provide many opportunities for this, but make sure your child eats enough so that the experience doesn't lead to frustration. Jump in to help when necessary, but pay attention to your child's hunger cues and note signs that he or she is full. You can always offer more if your child still

seems hungry, but you can't take the food back if you overfeed. When you're controlling the fork or spoon, resist the urge to slip in one more bite. And as your toddler gets the hang of eating, step back and let your child take over.

Some parents think that not letting kids feed themselves is for the best, but it takes away control that rightfully belongs to kids at this age. They need to decide whether to eat, what they will eat, and how much to eat - this is how they learn to recognize the internal cues that tell them when they're hungry and when they're full. Just as important, toddlers need to learn and practice the mechanics of feeding themselves.

### **Listen to Your Child**

Be alert to what your toddler is saying through his or her actions. A child who is building a tower of crackers or dropping carrots on the floor may be telling you he or she is full. Pushing food on a child who's not hungry may dull the internal cues that help a child know when he or she is full.

But this doesn't mean that it's practical or advisable for the child to eat on demand all day long. That's why structured meals and snack times are important. Your child will come to expect that food will be available during certain times of the day. If your child chooses not to eat anything at all, simply offer food again at the next meal or snack.

### **What If My Child Skips a Meal?**

Many toddlers need to eat often - as much as six times a day, including three meals and two or three snacks. Keep this in mind as you establish a pattern of meal and snacks. But realize that a food schedule only establishes the times that you will present food to your toddler. Your child may not take every opportunity to eat.

Allowing a child to skip a meal is a difficult concept because many of us were raised to clean our plates and not waste food. But children should be allowed to respond to their own hunger cues - a vital skill when it comes to maintaining a healthy weight. That means eating when hungry, and sometimes not eating, even if it's time for Thanksgiving dinner.

Establish times for meals and snacks and try to stick to them. A child who skips a meal finds it reassuring to know when to expect the next one. Avoid offering snacks or pacifying hungry kids with cups of milk or juice right before a meal - this can diminish the appetite and decrease your child's willingness to try the new food you're offering.

### **Avoid the Junk Food Trap**

Toddlers need to eat healthy to get the nutrients their growing bodies need. Candy, potato chips, and other low-nutrient "junk foods" shouldn't be part of a toddler's diet because they can crowd out the healthy foods needed. Also, food preferences are established early in life, so don't miss opportunities to help your toddler develop a taste for nutritious foods.

Even if your child likes candy or chips, don't feel like you must give in. Kids can't run to the store to buy them, so just don't keep them in the house. Or if you do, keep them out of sight so your child won't pester you for them. If your toddler asks for candy, simply say, "We don't have any candy," then present two healthy snack alternatives to choose from. The child will still enjoy the sense of control from deciding which healthy snack to eat.