

# Healthy from the Start

How feeding nurtures  
your young child's body,  
heart and mind



National Center for Infants,  
Toddlers and Families

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# Feeding

is one of a parent's most important jobs. It is how we help our children grow healthy and strong. But mealtime is about much more than **food**.

In this booklet, you will learn how meal and snack times give you a chance to help your child:

- Learn healthy eating habits
- Feel important and loved
- Feel understood and respected
- Trust that others will care for her
- Feel good about her body

## One Size Doesn't Fit All: What Your Individual Child Really Needs

Children are born all different sizes and weights. Some grow faster and bigger than others. Some eat more than others.

Babies and toddlers can be healthy at many different sizes. A baby's size—whether bigger or smaller than “normal”—does not tell us much about whether that child will be big or small as an adult.

Sometimes parents worry about their child's eating habits. Is she eating a balanced diet? Is he eating too much? Is she eating too little? **There is not one right amount of food children need to grow.** How much food children need is based on many factors such as their height, activity level, and how quickly their body burns calories.

**The best way to know if your child is growing well is to ask yourself whether he or she enjoys eating and has the energy to play and interact with others.** You can also talk with her health care provider. He or she will tell you how your child is doing by using the “growth chart.” This is a scale that shows how your child is growing according to her age and sex compared to other children the same age in the United States.

**This booklet is not intended to be a guide to how much and what kinds of food to feed your child.** To learn more about healthy eating, go to:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics:  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Guidelines at:  
[www.usda.gov/cnpp/KidsPyra/PyrBook.pdf](http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/KidsPyra/PyrBook.pdf)
- The American Dietetic Association:  
[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)
- Ellyn Satter Associates:  
[www.EllynSatter.com](http://www.EllynSatter.com)



# Ages and Stages

This chart will help you see how feeding changes as children grow and what you can do to help your child develop healthy eating habits.

	What your child can do	What you can do	What your child is learning
Birth to 12 Months	(from birth) Show you when she is hungry or full by using her voice, face and actions—like turning away from the breast or bottle when full or crying when hungry.	Respond to her signals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feed your child when she shows signs of being hungry.</li> <li>• Help her calm down so she can focus on eating.</li> <li>• Hold your baby during feedings and make eye contact.</li> <li>• Stop feeding when she shows she is full.</li> <li>• Try to avoid feeding your child every time she cries. She may not be hungry. She may just need comfort.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To trust that you will meet her needs.</li> <li>• That she is a good communicator.</li> <li>• That her parents are listening to her.</li> <li>• That she is important to you.</li> <li>• To eat and sleep in a predictable pattern.</li> <li>• To calm herself (with your help).</li> <li>• That milk (or food) is for nutrition, not for comfort.</li> </ul>
	(Starting at 6 months) Sit up. Learn to eat with his fingers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start using a high chair if you choose.</li> <li>• Create family mealtimes.</li> <li>• Start with semi-solid food from the spoon. Move to thicker and lumpier foods then to soft pieces of food.</li> <li>• Offer safe finger foods so he can practice feeding himself.</li> <li>• Turn off the TV during mealtimes. This is a time for interacting and sharing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To feed himself.</li> <li>• To decide how much to eat.</li> <li>• To know the tastes and textures he likes and doesn't like.</li> <li>• To focus on eating during mealtimes.</li> <li>• That eating and mealtimes are fun and feel good.</li> </ul>
12 to 24 Months	Feed herself many different foods. May begin learning to use a baby-safe fork and spoon or other utensils, such as chopsticks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer 3-4 healthy choices during mealtimes.</li> <li>• Offer 2-3 healthy snacks a day.</li> <li>• Offer foods that can be picked up, chewed or gummed, and swallowed easily. (Be sure to watch your child closely and avoid foods that are choking hazards.)</li> <li>• Offer child-size utensils and provide help when needed, if you want your child to learn to feed herself.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To try new foods.</li> <li>• To do things for herself.</li> <li>• To ask for help.</li> <li>• To trust that you will help her when she is struggling.</li> </ul>
	Use actions and words to communicate his thoughts and feelings. This includes showing or "telling" you what he wants and doesn't want, and when he is hungry or full.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make meals a time for connecting with your child.</li> <li>• Point to and say the names of foods or objects on the table.</li> <li>• Talk about things besides food—what you see outside the window or what you and your child did that day.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New words.</li> <li>• That he can effectively communicate to you when he is hungry or full.</li> <li>• That you will listen to and respect him.</li> <li>• That his feelings matter.</li> </ul>
24 to 36 Months	Choose which foods to eat.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try not to prepare separate meals for your child. Instead, offer 3-4 healthy choices during mealtimes, <i>including ones your child likes</i>.</li> <li>• Offer 2-3 healthy snacks a day.</li> <li>• Let your child see you making healthy eating choices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To make healthy food choices as she grows.</li> <li>• That she knows her own body.</li> <li>• To eat when she is hungry and stop when she is full.</li> </ul>
	Use words to express his thoughts and feelings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk with your child.</li> <li>• Ask questions and listen to what he has to say. Use words to help him describe his ideas, feelings, and experiences.</li> <li>• Encourage polite behavior.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New words</li> <li>• That mealtime is fun.</li> <li>• That his ideas matter.</li> <li>• Good behavior at the table.</li> </ul>
	Help out during mealtime.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer simple tasks like putting napkins on the table, placing pre-cut vegetables in the salad, or helping to mix batter.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That she is an important member of the family.</li> <li>• That she is very capable.</li> <li>• That helping others feels good.</li> </ul>



# Read Your Child's Signals

**Babies and young children know when they are hungry or full.**

They have many signals for letting us know what their bodies need by using their voices, faces, and actions. Reading your child's signals means watching and listening to her, and trying to understand what her behavior means. Responding to your child's signals lets her know that:

- she can trust herself to know when she is hungry and full.
- she is a good communicator and that her needs will be met.

**Babies have their own signals.** For example, when 3-month-old Jenna is hungry, she nuzzles her mother's shirt. When 3-month-old Damon is hungry, he sucks on his fingers and makes fussy noises.

**Sometimes the same signal can have more than one meaning.** For example, 9-month-old, Ricky, pushes the spoon away when he is full. Bianca, also 9 months, pushes the spoon away when she wants to feed herself.

**Toddlers have signals, too.** When 18-month-old Thomas is hungry, he takes his mother's hand, walks her to the counter, and points to the bananas. Liza, 24 months, simply says, "Want bana!"

## What to avoid

**Forcing your child to eat.** The fact is that forcing children to eat usually leads to the child eating less. Forcing also teaches children to rely on others to tell them how much to eat and what they are feeling. This does not lead to healthy eating habits or good self-esteem.

When it comes to eating, it can be helpful to see it as you and your child each having your own jobs. Your job is to provide your child with healthy food choices and pleasant meal and snack times. It is your child's job to decide *which* of these healthy foods to eat and *how much* to eat. When you approach feeding this way, your child learns to listen to his body and make healthy food choices. It also leads to fewer power struggles between parent and child around food. (From the work of Ellyn Satter.)

**Avoid nagging or making deals with your child.** "Just two more bites, just two more bites!" "If you eat your vegetables, you will get dessert." Strategies like these don't work in the long run. Children who learn to make deals about eating quickly learn to make deals and ask for rewards for doing other things—like brushing teeth or getting their shoes on. And soon they won't do anything unless there is a reward for it!

# Do You Know a "Picky" Eater?

Picky eating is when children refuse foods often or only want the same food over and over. Many parents worry that their picky eaters are not getting enough nutrition to grow. But in most cases, they are. In fact, 50% of parents think their children are picky eaters. But 95% of healthy babies and toddlers meet all their nutrient needs.

Some causes of picky eating	What you can try:
Some children are sensitive to the taste or smell of food and the way it feels in their mouth—its texture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Offer several healthy food choices—among foods your child <i>does</i> like—at each meal.</li><li>• Gently but frequently offer new kinds of foods. <i>Children need to be offered a new food as many as 10-15 times before they will eat it.</i></li><li>• Talk to your child's health care provider about any nutritional concerns you may have.</li></ul>
Some children are simply less likely to try new things based on their temperament—their individual way of approaching the world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Put new foods next to foods your child likes. Encourage him to touch, smell, lick, or taste the new food.</li><li>• Try offering healthy dips such as yogurt, hummus or low-fat salad dressings to encourage children to eat vegetables.</li></ul>
Some children can seem "picky" because they only want to eat foods they can feed themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Offer safe "finger foods" that your child can feed herself.</li><li>• Offer your child a spoon to hold while you're feeding her. This lets her feel in control.</li></ul>
Some children are very active. They may seem picky because they don't like sitting for long.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Set your child's meal out before he sits down.</li><li>• Keep mealtimes short—10 minutes or so. Let your child get up when he indicates he is finished eating.</li><li>• Put healthy foods, such as a bowl of strawberries or bananas, where your child can reach them so when he gets hungry he can easily get to good foods.</li></ul>
Some children have medical issues that make it difficult to swallow certain foods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Seek an evaluation by a health care provider. Sometimes children need special help with feeding.</li></ul>

# What Does Food Mean to You?

**Your own childhood experiences with food can make a difference in how you feed your children.** For example:

*One father had a strict rule that his 2-year-old must finish everything on her plate. He explained why: "When I was young, a lot of times there wasn't enough for us to eat. I guess I just hate to see food wasted when I know what it's like to be hungry."*

**Being aware of your own body image is also important.** For example:

*Marie was overweight as a child. She was often teased in school. She now finds herself controlling how much her 18-month-old son eats. She explains, "I don't ever want him to be made fun of. It's easy to put weight on, but hard to take it off!"*

Our images of what girls and boys should look like also make a difference. We may prefer "petite" girls and "big" boys.

**Thinking about our own experiences, beliefs and feelings about food is important. It helps us make the choice to do things the same way or differently than our parents did with us.**

- What were mealtimes like when you were growing up?
- How did your parents and caregivers make you feel about your body?
- How do you feel about your eating habits now?
- How do you feel about your body now?
- How do these feelings affect how and what you feed your child?

**Your culture—the customs, traditions and beliefs you grew up with—plays a big part in how you approach mealtime.** For example, parents in some cultures want their children to be independent from early on. They encourage their babies and toddlers to explore their food and feed themselves. Parents in other cultures believe children should rely on their parents and caregivers to feed them during the early years and don't encourage self-feeding.

**The foods you feed your child are also a very important way you share your culture.** Family traditions make children feel safe and loved. Special meals remind us of good times with family and friends. Sometimes these foods are not the most nutritious. You can still celebrate your family's traditions while making good nutrition a family goal—for example, baking rather than frying. Making small changes to family recipes keeps these traditions alive for our children, and teaches them about healthy choices, too.

**Think about how your own culture affects how you approach feeding your child.**

- What rules did your family have about eating or mealtimes?
- What are 2 or 3 things you want your child to learn about eating?
- What foods have special meaning in your family or culture?
- How can you change recipes to make them more nutritious if necessary?





# Healthy Eating Strategies for Babies and Toddlers

Here are some ways to help your child become a healthy eater:

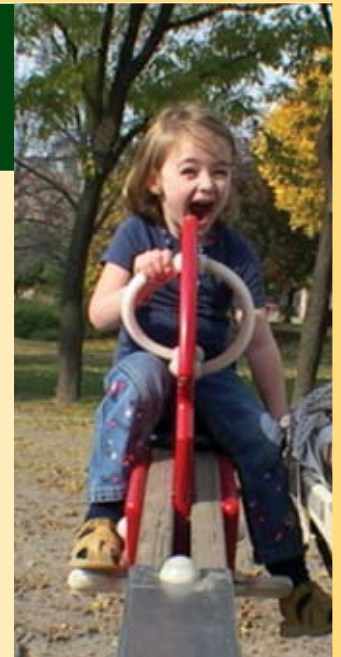
- 1. Remember: Meals are about more than food.** They are a time to connect with your child and support her overall development. Talk with your child during meals and don't let her eat alone. This helps build strong family relationships.
- 2. Create routines around mealtime.** Routines make children feel loved and secure. They also help children look forward to each meal. You might say a blessing if that's part of your family's tradition. Or, share something about your day before each meal.
- 3. Establish regular meal and snack times beginning when your child is 9-12 months old.** Give your child the words he needs to understand the connection between hunger and eating. When your child shows he is hungry, you might say: "You're hungry, aren't you? Well then, it's time to eat!" This helps children learn to link their feelings of hunger with the act of eating at regular times across the day.
- 4. Offer 3 to 4 healthy food choices at each meal.** Research shows that children will choose a healthy diet when they are offered a selection of healthy foods.
- 5. Don't force your baby or toddler to eat.** This often results in children refusing food and eating less.
- 6. Offer your child a healthy snack between meals if you think she is hungry.** This way if she doesn't eat much at one meal, she doesn't have to wait long to eat again.
- 7. Limit juice to no more than 4 ounces a day.** Juice has a lot of sugar. And drinking too much juice can fill children up and make them less hungry at mealtimes. Consider adding water to the juice. Offer fresh fruit instead of juice.
- 8. Be flexible about letting little ones get up from the table when they are done.** Babies and toddlers can't sit for long. Plan for three meals a day of about 10-20 minutes each and 2 to 3 snacks of about 5-15 minutes each.



- 9. Don't give up on new foods!** Patience is key. You may have to offer your child a new food 10 to 15 times before he will eat it. Encourage your child to touch the new food, lick, and taste it. Let him see you eat it. Children learn by watching and imitating you.
- 10. Turn off the TV (computers, and other screens) at mealtime.** Mealtime is a time to connect with your child. The television can distract children from eating. It also takes time away from talking as a family.
- 11. If you are concerned about your child's weight or activity level, talk to your child's health care provider.**

## Go Play!

Healthy eating and physical activity go hand-in-hand. So make movement a part of everyday family life. Take walks as a family, go to the playground, or dance inside to your favorite music. And limit television and computer time. Children who spend the most time in front of a screen are also the most likely to overeat and be overweight.



Dear Parents:

Feeding and mealtimes are important for children to grow healthy and strong. But they are also about much more than promoting a child's physical development. They provide rich opportunities to support your child's overall healthy development, especially social and emotional development.

In today's busy world, the everyday routine of feeding can be a chance to slow down and connect with children. What's on the table feeds your child's body, but what happens around the table feeds her heart and mind.

This booklet offers practical tips for how parents can help their children learn healthy eating habits and make them feel important and loved, respected and confident during mealtimes. MetLife Foundation is pleased to partner with ZERO TO THREE to bring this brochure to you and to support you as you nurture your child in the months and years ahead.

Sincerely,



Sibyl Jacobson  
President  
MetLife Foundation

## MetLife Foundation

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