

MEALTIME SUCCESS

(Structured Mealtimes for Happy, Healthy Babies and Toddlers)

Both you and your child want mealtimes to be as pleasant as possible. And you want to be sure your child eats enough healthy foods to help him* grow and develop as he should. It's a big step to go from bottle feeding every 3 or 4 hours to having a regular schedule of 3 meals and 2 snacks a day. Making a plan and helping your baby accept this new way of eating is called *structuring* mealtimes.

Sometimes it can be a real challenge to get a toddler to go along with the plan. At first it may be hard for him to stick to a set mealtime schedule! Your child is learning how to feed himself and may not want your help. And he may not always want to eat when you want him to. Often he would rather play than sit down and eat a healthy meal. But learning good mealtime habits is very important, and will benefit your child for the rest of his life. Here is a plan for structuring mealtimes and helping your child to learn these important new habits:

1. Ready, Set, Start

Every child is different, but sometime between 6 and 12 months, you can begin to get your baby used to a breakfast, lunch and dinner meal schedule. You can do this even while your child is still taking a bottle. From 1 to 2 years of age, your toddler will go from baby foods to eating more "grownup" table foods. Because you started your mealtime plan early, he will already be used to a schedule of 3 meals and 2 snacks a day.



Picture 1 Structured mealtimes are good for the whole family.

2. Limit mealtimes to 30 minutes.

Many parents think that if their child just sits in the high chair long enough, she will finish the food that's put in front of her. But dragging out the mealtime just frustrates your child. And it could start a "battle of wills" that nobody wins! Thirty minutes is plenty of time for your child to get enough calories and nutrition.

3. Don't give in to a "picky eater."

If your child refuses the healthy foods you give her, end the meal on time. Don't give her food again until the next scheduled meal or snack. This will teach your child that she needs to eat the food you provide at the time it is given. **This is a very valuable lesson for your child to learn!** If she doesn't eat at mealtime, she will just be hungrier for the next meal. And there's a good chance she'll eat what's provided next time!

- Plan a week's menu for 3 healthy meals and 2 snacks per day. Then **stick to your menu, even if your child refuses some meals.**
- It sometimes helps to plan activities for the week to occupy your child in between the new mealtimes. Plan outside activities when possible, such as a trip to the park, playing outside, or a special bike ride. Getting your child out of the kitchen area where old favorites are close by can help to reduce a hungry toddler's temper tantrums when he has just refused his healthy meal.

Picky eaters, continued...

- Keep your child out of the kitchen and away from tempting favorites like cookies or chips. Better yet, remove them from the home for awhile. This way you can show her, “Look, no more cookies here.”
- For older toddlers, you can use a sticker chart to reward good eating. Let your child put the sticker on the chart herself.
- If your picky eater is extra stubborn, you may have to take away the two snack times for awhile. That way she will be even hungrier when mealtime comes. This is especially true when starting new, “difficult” foods like vegetables or meats. Once she accepts the new foods, you can re-start the two snack times.

4. Control eating and drinking between meals and snacks.

Give *only water* in between meal and snack times. Don’t allow “grazing” or walking around with a bottle or cup of milk or juice. It actually helps to let your child’s hunger build up a little. When mealtime comes, a really hungry child is more likely to accept the foods you want him to eat.

5. Have a “sit to eat” policy.

Eating should always be done while sitting at the table or in the highchair. There are several good reasons for this:

- This is an ideal time for you and your child to interact and have pleasant talk. Our lives are so busy these days. It’s sometimes hard to make the time to talk with our children. Having set times to sit down and eat each day helps with family communication.
- It’s easier to stick to the 30-minute structured time frame if your child is not walking around carrying food or drinks and “grazing” all day.
- Sitting to eat is the safest position for your child. Lying down while eating or drinking can lead to tooth decay. And walking or running while eating can be a choking hazard.

6. Serve nutritious, well-balanced meals.

Each day offer foods from all 5 food groups (breads and cereals; vegetables; fruits; meat, fish, dried beans and poultry; and milk, yogurt and cheese). This balanced diet provides the nutrients your child needs to grow and develop as he should. Give milk with meals to make sure he gets enough calcium for strong bones and teeth. 100% fruit juice may be given for snacks (limit to 4 to 6 ounces per day). Water is good anytime.

7. Watch for signs of dehydration (getting dried out)

During the changeover to new liquids, it’s important to watch for signs that your child isn’t getting enough to drink. Call your child’s doctor if you notice any of these signs:

- Child does not urinate (pass water) for 8 hours or more (at least twice a day for toddlers and 3 times a day for infants)
- No tears when child cries; eyes look “sunken”
- Mouth feels dry or sticky
- Breathing is hard or fast
- An infant’s “soft spot” on top of the head is flat or “pulls in”
- Child is hard to wake up, acts confused, or doesn’t know what he’s doing.



Plan activities to make this time fun for your child.

You may be asked to weigh your child often and watch for weight gain or loss. To make sure the weight information is correct, try to weigh your child at about the same time each day. Use the same scale each time, and remove your child’s clothing before weighing.