

Building healthy eating habits



Caregivers want their children to be healthy. They also want their children to eat the right amount of food and to eat different kinds of foods. This can sometimes make meal times stressful. By building healthy habits, caregivers can have less stress **and** children can grow up to have good feelings about food.

What is my role as a caregiver?

- Decide when meals and snacks happen
- Choose the food to offer
- Offer food at a table and eat with your child

What is my child's role?

Decide how much to eat from what is offered at the meal

- Decide whether to eat or not to eat each food you offer

"Parents, remember, vegetables are not the most important thing at the table, **you** are!"

Remember

- It is normal and okay for your child to be picky or skip meals once in a while.
- Be flexible. Look at what your child eats over several days, not just one day or one meal.
- Avoid limiting the amount of food their children can eat at a meal or snack time. This leads to children becoming more focused on food. They may also sneak or hide food.
- Avoid coaxing or bribing children to eat a food. This can make children like those foods even less than before.

Meals and Snacks

- Aim for 3 meals and 1 to 3 healthy snacks each day. Set regular times for eating.
 - Post the schedule. When kids ask for food between eating times, tell them when the next time a meal or snack will be. For example, "in 20 minutes" or "at 10:30."
- Try to include vegetables, fruits, whole grains, lean meats and low-fat dairy at least once a day. Use the MyPlate graphic as your guide.
- Try not to let kids graze on food, even fruit or vegetables.
- If mealtime talk centers on weight or how much your child is eating, try something more positive. Talk about the taste and healthfulness of foods. Or don't talk about food at all!
- Build eating habits around all foods, not good or bad ones.



Offering new foods

- Limit food choices. Too many choices can be confusing. Try asking, “Would you like apples and cheese for snack or popcorn and grapes?”
- Make sure there is at least one food at each meal and snack that your child normally likes. Other foods you offer can be new.
- Let your child serve their own plate. Or ask permission. Say “May I put some rice on your plate?”

More Ideas

- Let your child help with grocery shopping and cooking. Have your child help:
 - choose a vegetable at the store.
 - put a slice of meat or cheese on a sandwich.
 - peel a banana.
 - mix or stir ingredients.
 - put plates or cups on the table.
- Eat with your child.
 - Set a good example with your food choices.
 - Make mealtimes pleasant.
 - Mealtime can be a great time to talk with your child.
- Use fun activities to inspire your child to eat.
 - Do not offer food as a reward or a punishment.
 - Do not punish a child for not eating a new food.
- Worry less about how much food you think should be eaten.
 - Your child's body knows how much to eat. Let them decide. Don't push for more bites or limit portions.
 - Child-size servings are much smaller than adult-size servings.
 - A child who is growing well is getting enough to eat.
 - If you are concerned about the amount or types of food your child is eating, talk to your primary care provider.

Other helpful teaching sheets

[#1550](#) 4-3-2-1-0 Steps to a healthier you

[#1470](#) Smart snacking

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any questions or concerns or if your child has special health care needs that were not covered by this information.

This sheet was created to help you care for your child or family member. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up.