

CHILDHOOD GROWTH AND EATING BEHAVIORS

As children grow and develop, there are certain behaviors that we can expect. Even though some of these normal behaviors (like picky eating) can drive us crazy, most kids aren't acting this way on purpose.

We can worry less about our child's eating if we understand why they behave the way they do and have an idea of what to expect as they grow.

This understanding allows us to trust our child's eating ability, ultimately helping them learn to trust themselves.



WHAT TODDLERS ARE LIKE WITH EATING

Skeptical

- No longer excited about eating and can be picky.
- Won't immediately like or want to try a new food.
- Will experiment with new foods and then gradually learn to like them.

Erratic

- Growth is slowed and appetite decreases.
- What they like one day, they won't like the next.
- Eat a lot one day (or meal) and hardly anything the next.
- Won't eat some of everything at the meal — only one or two foods.

Opinionated

- Say "no" a lot and try to test limits.
- Want parents there but not to interfere.

Messy

- Still developing eating skills; will make a mess when eating but not on purpose.
- Learning to use a fork and spoon but frequently uses fingers.
- Start to throw food as they learn about cause and effect: "If I throw my food, Mom gets upset!"

WHAT PRESCHOOLERS ARE LIKE WITH EATING

Curious

- Can learn about mealtime rules but may have difficulty following them due to a lack of self-control.
- Less suspicious of new foods and more willing to taste foods.
- Starting to enjoy eating but will completely lose interest when full.

Like to please/imitate

- Want to eat the foods that you do because they think you're great!
- Influenced by TV, media and peers.

Playful

- Like to play with food and have quirky ways of eating; they don't do it to get a rise out of you, they're just being themselves.
- Can be easily distracted.
- Eat well when the table is a pleasant place to be.

The feeding advice in this handout is based on Ellyn Satter's principles and guidelines. For more about Satter's work, see ellynsatterinstitute.org

PATIENCE WORKS BETTER THAN PRESSURE

We often expect children to know how to eat and enjoy different foods, but we forget it's a skill they must learn from adults first — just like riding a bike, writing their name, or brushing their teeth.

Children learn this skill best when adults understand the child's needs, offer plenty of opportunities to try foods, trust that the child is capable of learning and rely on trust rather than pressure.



WHAT ADULTS SHOULD EXPECT FROM CHILDREN

Children begin to get comfortable with food through exposure — seeing, touching, smelling or tasting. Children may need dozens of exposures to a food before they learn to eat it. With new foods, a child might:

- Look at it but not taste it. Children may need to watch you eat a food many times before they're willing to try it.
- Touch and play with it, but still not taste it.
- Put the food in their mouth to learn about its taste and texture, then take it out.
- Swallow the food but decide not to eat more.

NEVER PRESSURE CHILDREN TO EAT

Pressure is anything you would do or say to **get** your child to eat more, less, or differently than they would on their own. Pressuring a child may work to get them to eat differently in the moment, but it often backfires in the long-term. With pressure, children enjoy eating less and have fewer foods they're willing to eat. Pressure also teaches children to ignore their feelings of hunger and fullness, disrupting their ability to self-regulate food intake. Pressure can be:

- Trying to get children to eat certain foods.
- Trying to get children to eat more.
- Trying to get children to eat less.
- Using rewards or bribes to get children to eat.
- Trying to get children to eat foods before they're ready.
- Trying to sneak foods.

REMEMBER:

Children are good at detecting pressure. If you pressure your child to eat more, they will often eat less. If you pressure your child to eat less, they will often eat more.

The feeding advice in this handout is based on Ellyn Satter's principles and guidelines. For more about Satter's work, visit ellynsatterinstitute.org.



United Way
for Southeastern Michigan

PATIENCE WORKS BETTER THAN PRESSURE

Children can relax and do their best with eating when adults provide proper support, structure and opportunities. Once you have done your jobs with feeding (deciding what, when and where), allow children to do their jobs with eating (deciding whether and how much). Take the pressure off eating with these tips:

- Always have something at the table your child is familiar with. Pair new foods with foods you know your child likes. Starchy foods (bread, rice, pasta) are good “safe” foods for most children.
- Include your child in the meal process by taking them grocery shopping and having them wash foods, tear lettuce, set the table, stir sauces or measure ingredients.
- Talk about the sensory qualities of food (taste, texture, color, scent) to help children become more familiar. Example: “Kiwis are fuzzy on the outside, and soft and sweet on the inside. I think they taste kind of like strawberries.”
- Role modeling is a powerful tool. Eat the same foods you want your child to eat. If children see you eating and enjoying food, they will be more likely to eat it too.
- Allow your child to taste a food and politely spit it into a napkin if they don’t like it.
- Allow children to explore their natural curiosity. Children will touch, smell or lick new foods to become familiar with them.
- Use dips or spreads to help children learn to like certain fruits and vegetables.
- Offer the same food in a variety of ways: raw, cooked, whole, sliced, etc.



The feeding advice in this handout is based on Ellyn Satter's principles and guidelines. For more about Satter's work, visit ellynsatterinstitute.org.

WEEK 2: LEARNING AND GOALS

What I Learned

FOCUS ON MAKING GOALS TO CHANGE SPECIFIC BEHAVIORS (BIG OR SMALL). FOR EXAMPLE:

Instead of, “I won’t pressure my child to eat.”

Try, “I will avoid pressuring my child to eat by trusting them to choose what foods to eat from what I’ve offered.”

My Goals

WEEK 2: THINK, PAIR, SHARE

As children grow and develop, their eating habits change. What changes, if any, have you noticed in your child's eating habits or behaviors as they've gotten older? Has anything gotten easier? Has anything become more of a challenge?

THINK about this topic quietly on your own.

PAIR with a partner and discuss your thoughts.

SHARE your thoughts with the group.
