

Feeding Struggles for Toddlers and Preschoolers

Your child should learn one set of manners, appropriate at all meals – whether eating at home, with company, at a restaurant, or at someone else's house.

The following guidelines can help you teach your child appropriate mealtime behavior. If you follow the guidelines *consistently*, mealtime will no longer be a problem. You and your child will enjoy mealtime and will be able to look forward to it as a special time you have together.

Establish sit-down, family-style meals, where everyone sits down together to eat.
Turn off the television.

Set a reasonable time limit for each meal.
20-30 minutes is a good amount. You may use a portable kitchen timer to indicate when the meal is over.

Establish a set of mealtime rules for your child.
Some examples: 1. Remain seated. 2. Use your silverware, not your fingers. 3. Don't throw food. 4. Close your mouth when you chew. Rules should be reasonable, based on the age of your child. Don't expect a young child to learn all the rules quickly. Start with two or three rules. After your child has learned to follow them, add a few more rules gradually, until you have introduced all the rules you plan to teach.

Tell your child the rules (using a gentle tone) once at the beginning of each meal until the child has learned to follow them consistently.
Don't nag your child about the rules.

Give your child small portions of preferred foods – an amount you are sure the child will eat. You can always give more. At first, give a small amount that your child must eat to succeed, and then praise your child for eating it. Then gradually increase the quantity and the types of food you want the child to try. Do not make your child "clean the plate."

Do not carry on conversations with another adult for longer than a few minutes at a time.
Include your child in conversations and talk about things that you know interest your child. Make sure you do not nag, threaten, or warn during mealtimes. Use mealtime as an opportunity to praise your child for appropriate behaviors throughout the day and to teach your child how to behave in a social situation.

Be sure to praise your child for appropriate behaviors (such as using utensils, sitting quietly, talking nicely, etc.) whenever they occur throughout the meal.
You can't praise too often! Praise is how you teach your child what behavior pleases you.

If your child breaks a rule, have the child practice the correct behavior.
The third time your child breaks any rule, use discipline. Time-out is one good way to teach your child the rules at meals. Put your child in time-out for misbehaviors as many times as necessary until the time limit for the meal is up.

When the time for the meal is up, clear the table regardless of whether your child is finished.
Don't say anything to your child beyond announcing that the meal is over. Once your child is usually staying at the table and finishing meals on time, you can stop using the timer.

If your child did not finish the last meal (either because the child refused to eat or because the child was in time-out and ran out of time), do not offer dessert and do not allow your child to eat or drink anything except water until the next meal.
If your child whines and constantly asks for snacks, place the child in time-out.

Even under normal circumstances, limit snacks.
If you allow your child to fill up on snacks, the child will not be hungry at mealtimes. Give snacks that have nutritional value (such as carrot sticks, raisins, fruit, etc.) rather than junk food. You will also be teaching your child good eating habits this way.

When your child has learned to follow your mealtime rules consistently, you no longer need to go over them at the beginning of each meal.
It is, however, still a good idea to review the rules from time to time. The best way to do this is to "catch them being good" and remind your child of a rule by praising him for following it.