



A nutrition Fact Sheet



Family Meals with Growing Children

From preschool through teen years, family mealtimes are a good time to keep in touch with growing children. Family meals may be breakfast, lunch, or dinner - whatever works for your family's schedule.

Children's Stages

Children go through stages and so do their eating behaviors. Knowing the stages helps parents guide their children and have positive family meals.

Toddlers...

- Are messy eaters and are just learning to use forks and spoons. Parents need to be ready to wipe up spills.
- Do best with finger foods.
- Eat only 1-2 tablespoons of food at a time. Appetites go up and down during the day. Parents do not need to worry if a child sometimes only eats a small amount of food for a meal or snack.
- Say "no" to new foods. When parents ignore the "no" and just eat and enjoy the food, the toddler may begin to eat and enjoy it too.
- May need quiet time before meals to calm down.
- Learn new words from mealtime conversations.

Preschoolers...

- Are curious and ask "why?"
- Like to help mix or stir food, make sandwiches, or clean fruits and vegetables.
- Like to eat foods they helped prepare.
- Eat best when surrounded by pleasant conversation.

5 to 12 year olds...

- Generally eat well.
- Are cooperative.
- Can carry on a conversation.
- Are more accepting of new foods.
- Enjoy cooking and eating simple foods they make.

Teenagers...

- Are learning how to be adults and are trying different behaviors.
- Are able to handle some responsibility for preparing meals, if there's time.
- May want to eat the same foods every day.
- Eat foods eaten by friends.
- May complain about family mealtimes, but still need conversation and family meals.

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Take the Fight Out of Family Meals - Understanding Who Does What

Developing pleasant mealtimes can be a struggle with fights about food and how much the child is eating. To reduce fights about food, parents need to know that parents and children have different responsibilities. Parents want children to eat and be healthy, but forcing children to eat has the opposite effect. Power struggles around food can be reduced by “understanding who does what.” This is simple and it works. It takes some practice. The information below is from Ellyn Satter’s Division of Responsibility in Eating.

Parents decide what food is served.

- Serve a variety of foods.
- Make sure there is something the children like at each meal.

Parents decide when food is served.

- Schedule regular times for meals and snacks and expect children to come eat at that time.
- If a child does not eat at a meal and wants food afterwards, tell the child to wait until the next meal or snack time. However, do not put children to bed hungry.

Parents decide where food is served.

- Encourage eating in places free from distraction.
- Have structured, sit-down meals.

Children decide how much to eat.

- Serve small portions. Allow children to ask for second helpings. A toddler only eats one to two tablespoons of food at a time and will sometimes eat well at one meal and not the next.
- Don’t tell children that they have not eaten enough. Children’s bodies will tell them if they are hungry.

Children decide whether or not to eat.

- Don’t worry if children only eat a small amount at a meal. If children are not snacking, they will eat if they are hungry.
- Even if a child does not eat, have the child sit at the table to show that mealtimes are important for the family.

Tips for Successful Family Meals

- Make the family meal a priority. Tell children that eating together is important and something that they will do as a family.
- Set “rules” to keep conversations pleasant. Save arguments for another time.
- Plan table talk. What will happen today or what did happen today? What will tomorrow bring? Does anyone have any news?
- Give everyone time to talk. Listen to each other. Only one person should talk at a time.
- Show children the respect and good manners that you want them to show you and others. Children learn by watching adults.



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