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child + family health service

PARENTING WITH CONFIDENCE



toddlers and mealtimes

The behaviour of children at mealtimes is a common source of stress for parents. Common toddler behaviours include running around while eating and making a mess. Eating while running around increases the risk of choking. Making changes and promoting healthy, happy eating experiences will take time.

Toddlers are curious and energetic, which makes them want to explore. Sitting down for any length of time is an effort for a young child. Suggestions to get your child to sit down at mealtimes include:

- Accept that behaviour changes take time and effort. Be patient and calm.
- Discuss your plan of action with your partner and other carers so that your approaches are consistent.
- Try and share meals and snacks with your child as much as possible. Establish a predictable mealtime routine to help your child remember that they are required to sit down at an appropriate table without distractions such as TV, laptops and mobile phones. **Sit down and eat together.**
- Concentrate on making mealtimes fun and enjoyable so that your child is more likely to want to stay at the table. For example, involve your child in family discussions and mealtime preparation.
- If the child leaves the table, calmly return them to the table and simply say "We sit down when we eat" Give your child 2 chances after returning them to the table and explaining "We sit down when we eat or the meal will be removed"
- On the 3rd occasion, remove the meal. Meal time is over. If your child is hungry later you can reoffer the meal. Be consistent. Insist that snacks are also eaten while sitting down.
- Compliment your child whenever they show the desired behaviour. Be a good role model.
- Be realistic about the timing of meals – for example, don't schedule mealtimes for when your child is overtired.

Making a mess

It takes time to develop the fine motor skills required to eat independently. Don't assume that your child is deliberately being messy when they eat, since guiding food to the mouth without any spills is tricky for a toddler. Suggestions include:

- Find out about the stages of child development, so that you don't expect too much of your child.
- Plan for the mess by putting a plastic sheet under the highchair.
- Present the foods in easy-to-eat ways, such as cut into strips or fingers.
- Allow your child to eat with their hands rather than a knife and fork.
- Say something like 'food is for eating' or 'are you finished?' if your child throws food.
- Do not pay attention to the food on the floor – pick it up when the meal is finished.

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Wasting food

Toddlers tend to play with their food. For example, your child may like to squash foods in their hands, throw food onto the floor or leave the majority of food uneaten on their plate. This can be stressful to parents for three reasons: food costs money, meals take time and effort to prepare, and parents may be concerned their child isn't eating enough.

You may worry about whether they are getting enough to eat. Toddlers are good at picking up on your anxiety. They are also good at recognising their own hunger and fullness signals and, short of illness, will never voluntarily starve themselves. Suggestions include :

- Aim to make mealtimes relaxed and enjoyable for everyone in the family.
- Avoid battles with toddlers about food and eating. Remember that a healthy toddler will know when they are full.
- Your toddler's tummy is much smaller than yours. Offer a variety of small portions on their plate.
- You can always give them more.
- Try using special plates for toddlers, made of non-breakable material, to help prevent food being tipped off easily.
- Don't force your child to finish everything on their plate. It is better to waste a few leftovers than battle with your child or force them to eat when they've had enough.
- Try putting dishes of food centrally on the dinner table and allow your child to serve themselves.

Promoting happy eating experiences at mealtime & reward systems, suggestions include :

- Involve your child in setting the table and lead by example
- Your child may feel more inclined to copy your behaviour if you promote them to a 'big' chair rather than their highchair. Give them the same kind of place setting as yours but don't give them sharp cutlery.
- Point out the advantages of good table manners. For example, it is difficult for your child to make themselves understood if they are talking with their mouth full.
- Compliment your child whenever they show good table manners.
- Offer stickers or hand stamps for sitting nicely or showing good manners. Don't use sweets or desserts as bribes.

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