

RAISING A HEALTHY EATER



Your child is learning about food and developing eating habits from the time they start solids. Being consistent and starting to work on good eating habits early can prevent problems such as picky eating, nutritional deficiencies and overweight / obesity.



Some strategies that may help...

Be clear about where the responsibility lies...

It is very easy to feel responsible for how much your child eats, or the variety of food they will eat.

- Parents are responsible for selecting the **type** of food that will be served, **how** it will be presented and **when/where** the meal will be held
- Children are responsible for **which** foods they eat, how **much** they will eat, and even if they **will** eat at all

When you become overly involved in how much your child eats, the situation can become stressful for everyone involved. Babies and children are very good at picking up on this stress and may react by refusing the food.

Explore your child's relationship to food...

Help your child to make friends with food by letting them play with it. When they are able to hold a spoon, let them have a spoon as well.

If they want to put their hand into the food and then up to their mouth – don't worry! This is all part of the learning process but be prepared for a mess!

To keep them occupied (and happy in the high chair) give your child some age appropriate finger foods on their highchair tray to explore.



Create a positive mealtime environment...

- Whenever possible, eat with your child at the table. If your child is in a highchair bring this up to the table.
- Set a good example: eat a variety of foods and try not to make negative comments about foods you don't like.
- Keep distractions to a minimum. If a distraction is needed, it needs to be part of the meal and **not** an outside distraction (e.g. some finger food on the side of a meal). Books, videos and toys may take the child's attention away from the meal. If these distractions are already part of your child's mealtime, they may need to be taken away gradually.



Stick to a meal/snack schedule...

- Most children thrive on 3 meals and 2 snack times per day. Plan meals and snacks at scheduled times and in a regular place. Set aside 20-30 minutes for meal times and 10–20 minutes for snacks. If the food is not eaten within this time period, allow your child to leave the table or highchair.
- Try to avoid giving your child food half an hour to an hour before a meal or snack, offer water only and then move onto a different activity.
- Milk is best offered after a meal, in a cup, from about 1 year of age, or breastfeed after a meal. Water is the best drink between meals. Keep juice for special times.
- 500ml (2 cups) of milk per day is plenty for your toddler or child. Too much milk can fill their tummy up and reduce their appetite.

Don't force the issue!

- Force-feeding your child will only create tension and turn meal times into a war zone. Respect your child when they let you know they've had enough. By pressuring your child to eat more than they feel comfortable with, they can lose the ability to regulate what they eat, leading to overweight or obesity later in childhood.
- Try to avoid having 'forbidden foods'. High fat and high sugar foods should only be offered occasionally but shouldn't have bad labels attached to them. Doing this can make them more attractive, and/or send out confusing messages when these 'bad' foods are offered at positive events like birthday parties.
- Using food as rewards can teach children that certain foods are more enjoyable than others and they may end up disliking the healthy food more. Rewards may be playing together, a story, a trip to the park, stickers or stamps for their collection.



Try and try again

- Some children can be wary of trying new foods, especially towards the second year of life.
- The more exposure they have to a food, the more they will tend to accept it. The trick is to be consistent, try putting a new food on your child's plate every time the family is having that food. Keep it separate from liked foods, and make it clear that they do not have to eat it but it would be good if they could take a small amount (even if they have to spit it out!).
- Smile as you give your child a new good. A food is likely to be perceived positively if it is given in a happy and relaxed way
- A child can have one or two foods that they *really* don't like and don't have to eat but no more.

What if they don't eat?!

- Avoid substituting uneaten meals with milk drinks, treat foods or other meals. Your child will soon learn that this is the reward for food refusal at meals.
- If your child eats poorly at a meal, wait until the next scheduled meal or snack before offering something new (offer only water).
- A well child is unlikely to starve

NOTE: This information sheet is intended for healthy children. If your child has a medical or developmental condition that impacts on their ability to eat, please consult your health professional.

The information given in this fact sheet is intended as a general guide and is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or information given by a registered dietitian (NZRD). To locate a NZRD, click on 'Find a Dietitian' on the homepage of this website. To check your dietitian is registered, go to the New Zealand Dietitians Board website at www.dietitiansboard.org.nz/register.aspx

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