



Y Parenting Tips

Healthy Eating Tips for Toddlers and Children

Variety is the spice of life—we would soon become bored if we ate the same foods all day, everyday. While we all have foods that we love, they would soon lose appeal if they were all we ever ate.

Offering toddlers and children a variety of different foods gives them the opportunity to:

- taste different foods—sweet, sour, spicy, juicy
- experience different textures—grainy, furry, soft, hard, slippery
- enjoy a balanced diet from the five food groups, encouraging healthy eating habits
- strengthen the muscles in their mouth and throat—to swallow, chew, suck, lick, etc
- develop language—exercising the tongue as well as introducing children to the names of food.

Growth slows at around two years of age, so toddlers often have smaller appetites and need less food (depending on their activity levels) and they need it more often. They have smaller tummies and burn off food more quickly, but be aware that food intake can change dramatically from day to day.

Typically, children will eat when they are hungry. Energy from foods that are high in sugar (eg lollies and sweet biscuits) is used up by the body more quickly than energy from foods such as bread, cereals and fruit/vegetables—so children come back for more. Our bodies love sugar—most of us crave a chocolate bar more than a carrot!

What about fussy eaters?

'Fussy eating' happens for a variety of reasons. Children might not like a particular food. As mentioned, their growth slows—a natural part of life at this age—and they might not need/want as much to eat. They might also want to test parents by seeing what will happen if they reject a certain food.

If your child doesn't want to eat what is being offered, then provide an alternative healthy meal or snack—eg a sandwich or piece of fruit. Don't be tempted to give them highly processed 'junk' foods. Although they might enjoy eating these types of food, they can lead to them rejecting healthy foods altogether, knowing you will 'reward' their rejection. And try to avoid food wars, which can make mealtimes unpleasant and stressful for everyone. Accept that sometimes children genuinely might not want to eat, and even if not hungry now, they might feel like a lighter meal in half an hour.

How can I make eating fun?

If children are allowed to help prepare food they are more likely to eat it. Letting them help also gives them the opportunity to:

- learn about nutrition and food facts—how food is grown, when it is in season, why frozen food melts outside the freezer etc

- explore the textures, colours, shapes and smells of different foods
- learn about hygiene—washing hands and cleaning up
- develop cooking skills—stirring, pouring, cutting
- learn about foods from different cultures—eg pasta from Italy, Asian stir-fried dishes.

Under supervision, children can help prepare and cook:

- cakes, muffins and breads
- smoothies (blending milk and fruit together)
- simple main meals—eg spaghetti bolognese
- pikelets and pancakes
- vegetables—younger children can wash the food, while older children can cut and peel.

Only allow older (10+ years) children to use knives and other sharp implements. Younger children can help butter bread etc but to prevent accidents, kitchen appliances such as ovens, microwaves, kettles, blenders/food processors should only be used by adults or supervised older children. Very young children (under five) can help measure out ingredients and help stir batter.

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What are some ideas for healthy snacks?

Health snacks are traditionally seen as boring, but some ideas to encourage healthy snacking include serving:

- raisin bread or fruit loaf
- toasted English muffins or bagels
- fresh/dried fruit—either eaten separately or in a fruit salad, or on a fruit and cheese platter
- cheese, dips, crackers and mixed vege sticks—steam vegetables for children under three years old to avoid choking
- yoghurt
- scones or buns.

What about drinks?

The number of drinks children need each day will depend on:

- their activity level—the more running/climbing etc they do, the more drinks they need
- the weather—the hotter the weather, the more they sweat to cool down, which means they need to drink more
- general health—sick children need more to drink, especially if they are running a temperature, vomiting, or have diarrhoea.

Water is the best fluid to quench our thirst—our bodies take longer to absorb drinks that contain sugar, so we don't get an immediate benefit. Children should be encouraged to drink water throughout the day. Drink bottles filled with water can be kept in the fridge, easily accessible to children.

Three glasses of milk—or calcium enriched milk alternatives such as soy milk—will contribute to the minimum daily requirement of dairy foods. And as researchers have found that eating chocolate in moderation is actually good for us (see below) cocoa in milk is another good source of energy.

Chocolate is high in sugar and fat, however it also contains some essential nutrients:

- protein and Vitamin E—for the repair and maintenance of healthy cells (such as skin cells)
- calcium, phosphorus and magnesium—for strong teeth and bones
- iron—to form haemoglobin, which carries oxygen around in our blood
- antioxidants— to protect us against heart disease and cancer.

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