

Teaching Good Food Habits

Like reading and writing, brushing teeth, and hand washing, learning good food habits is a life skill that can help your child live a healthy, satisfying life. Here's how you can nurture good food habits.

Give your child enough table time.

Does your child seem to dawdle at the table? That's normal. Young children don't have the muscle development or skills to eat as fast as you. They still need practice with eating utensils. Eat at a pace that allows you to enjoy your food. It takes about 20 minutes for the stomach to feel full. Rushing mealtime only leads to frustration for you, your child, and others at the table!

Be a good role model. Your child watches what you eat.

If you eat and enjoy collard greens, bok choy, asparagus, or plantains, chances are your child will try them too – if not now, then probably later. It's not just what you say, it's also what you do. As kids grow up, a brother, sister, and others in their life are role models, too. Remember most children want to grow up doing what others do.



Skip the urge to reward, punish, or appease your child with food.

Have you ever been tempted to say: “If you don’t eat one more bite, I’ll be mad!” “Clean your plate so you can play,” “No dessert until you eat your vegetables,” or “Stop crying, and I’ll give you a cookie”?

Remarks like these may lead kids to eating problems. They may create unneeded conflict and struggles between you and your child at the table.

- Eating for parental approval or love teaches unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs about food and themselves.
- Rewarding a clean plate teaches them to ignore body signals, and that may lead to overeating.
- Offering a food (dessert) as a reward for eating another (veggies) makes some foods seem better.
- Getting a food treat to feel better teaches kids to relieve negative feelings by eating. This can lead to overeating later on.

Instead use a non-food approach.

Reward your child with attention and kind words. Console with hugs and talk. Show love by spending time and having fun together. Drop the “clean plate club.”

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A Nurturing Place To Eat Is...

Caring, calm, and respectful...

- Focus mealtime on eating and family talks that includes your child. Turn off the TV.
- Plan quiet time for eating so your child comes to the table relaxed.

Comfortable and safe from injury...

- Always stay with a young child who is eating, even if you must do other tasks.
- Get a stable, comfortable, child-size chair. A counter stool without back support isn't safe.
- Get easy-to-hold, child-size utensils and cups.

Safe from choking...

- For a child under age four, skip hard, small, whole foods. That includes popcorn, nuts, seeds, and hard candy. Slice foods such as hot dogs, grapes, and raw carrots in small strips.
- Teach your child to chew foods well before swallowing them so he or she won't choke.
- Be careful with sticky foods like peanut butter. Spread just a thin layer on bread.

