Mealtime Length

There is no specific length of time each mealtime with your toddler should take. However, you may still feel like most of your toddler’s meals are too short, or too long. Here are some tips, and remember, a really short or long meal once in a while is okay.

Here are some important tips to remember:

∗ A toddler cannot sit still for very long. If your toddler starts to fidget, it may be that she has sat for too long. Give her time to get up or move around a bit, but discourage eating unless sitting at a table or in a high chair.

∗ If your child doesn’t want to eat anymore, she is done. This should be up to her. Teaching your child to listen to her “hungry” or “full” cues is important to prevent overweight later in life.

∗ Trying to get your child to eat one more bite may lead to a struggle that may lead your child to not want to eat.

∗ As long as your child is growing, he or she is getting enough to eat.
Mealtime Length

If you feel your child’s mealtime is too short:

- Your child may not be getting enough to eat. This does not mean you should be serving your child more food during each meal, but you may want to increase the number of meals/snacks your child has each day. Aim for 3 meals and 3 snacks, and serve healthy fruits and vegetables, which can be very filling.

- Your child may feel hurried to eat. If so, make sure to reinforce that mealtimes are supposed to be pleasant and enjoyable. Allow your child to set his or her own mealtime pace. Remember that toddlers need time during meals to explore their foods. They like to smell, touch, and taste food. This is how they learn! Toddlers need time not only to eat, but also to learn to use forks and spoons, and this takes a lot of practice. Try to avoid battles over food and eating.

- Eating too fast can lead to choking. If this is a concern for you, make eating into a game. Each bite your toddler takes has to be chewed 20 times, you can make up a song to sing to go along with your child’s chewing, or you can chew your food 20 times together, counting along on your fingers.
Mealtime Length

If you feel your child’s mealtime is too long:

* Is the mealtime taking a while because your child is still eating? Or because he or she is playing? Allow your child time to explore, but if eating has stopped for ten minutes, take the food away without making a fuss.

* Is the mealtime taking a long time because you are frequently telling your child what to do? Toddlers know when they are hungry and when they are full. Allowing your child to decide what and how much to eat from the foods you have served will cut down on your stress during mealtimes, and will allow your child to eat at a normal speed.

* If the mealtime is taking a long time because your child is still eating, he or she may be ready for a growth spurt. Toddlers development slows down after their first birthday, and growth happens in spurts. If longer meals are something new, your child may be growing and will need extra nourishment for that to happen.

* If your child consistently has long mealtimes and is eating rather than playing, he or she may be eating too much. Review the overeating handout to find ways to prevent overeating.