What Should You Do if Your Child Will Not Eat at Regular Meal and Snack Times

Remember, only your child knows if he/she is hungry or full. Allowing your child to choose what and how much to eat from what you serve teaches important skills. When you follow "parent provides, child decides", children learn to eat only as much as they need which leads to healthier eating habits.

Ask yourself the following questions:

☐ Do you make your child eat? If you said yes…

What Happens: Your child learns to ignore what his/her stomach says. Your child may be full already, but is overeating to please you. This may not be a problem if it happens once or twice, but if you are regularly making your child eat, your child may learn to hate mealtimes because they are unpleasant for him.

☐ Do you offer different food? If you said yes…

What Happens: If you serve something else, your child will think that you don’t expect him/her to eat the food you make. Make one meal for everybody with a variety of healthy foods and let your toddler decide what to eat. If she doesn’t eat at this meal, she will make up for it at another meal. Also, remember that only your child knows if she is full, so while you may not think she is eating enough, she may have filled her little belly already.

☐ Do you offer the food at a later time? If you said yes…

What Happens: Your child learns that he/she does not have to eat at mealtimes. Just like children go through spurts where they eat a lot all the time, they also go through phases where they don’t seem to eat enough. Remember to offer healthy meals and snacks at regular times throughout the day, and to follow this schedule as much as possible. This will allow your child to become hungry in between regular feeding times, and more likely to eat his meal.

☐ Do you offer dessert if your child will eat? If you said yes…

What Happens: Using food as a reward (or a punishment) teaches children to listen to you, rather than to their own feelings of hunger or fullness. Your toddler will also learn that he or she doesn’t have to eat a food if a good reward isn’t offered. For instance, if you tell your child she can’t have any ice cream if she doesn’t eat her brussel sprouts, she may decide that she doesn’t want ice cream enough for it to be worth having to eat brussel sprouts.
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Here are some tips to help you...

**Tip:** Let your toddler have a say in what you make. Don’t let her choose everything, but give her a choice. For instance, if you are already making chicken and biscuits, you could ask your toddler if she would prefer corn or green beans with dinner.

**Tip:** If your child won’t eat a specific food, try eating the food yourself. If your toddler sees you and the other family members enjoying a food, he will not be as afraid of the strange food, and will eat it because your toddler wants to eat what you are eating.

**Tip:** Offer your child drinks AFTER she has finished eating. A toddler’s belly is very small, and can only hold so much. If your toddler fills up on drinks before eating, there may not be any room left for the food that a growing body needs.

**Tip:** Remember to stick to a feeding schedule for your child. This will allow your child to become hungry between mealtimes. If your child comes to the table hungry, he is more likely to eat the food you’ve made.

**Tip:** Tell your child when it is getting time to eat soon. Your toddler may be so tired or excited from play activities that she doesn’t feel like eating. Giving her a warning 10-15 minutes before the meal will give her time to settle down to eat.

**Tip:** Don’t let your child play during mealtimes. This includes reading books, playing with toys, or watching television. These activities distract your toddler from paying attention to what he is eating. If you focus on the food during mealtimes, this allows your toddler to enjoy the food he is eating, and also to stop eating when he is full. This rule should apply to everyone in the family, to help role model healthy eating habits to your toddler.

**Tip:** Try to talk positively to your child instead of giving food as a reward or punishment. If your child feels like mealtimes are not a fun or happy time, she may learn to avoid mealtimes to avoid fighting with you. Or your child may think that the only way to get your attention is through fighting, and may try to get your attention through fighting during other times.

**Tip:** Be sure to give your toddler small servings. That way he can ask for more if he wants to. Allowing him to succeed in finishing his food will make him feel good about eating.

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