



## *Positive Parenting of Toddlers*

# ***Independent Eating***

*Family meals can be an enjoyable social event. Meal times with a toddler can be busy and chaotic while they are learning how to eat independently. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you encourage your toddler to eat with a spoon, sit at a table with others and eat a variety of foods.*

## **When Are Children Able To Feed Themselves?**

Toddlers' skills improve if they are given as many opportunities to feed themselves as possible. Most toddlers will have started to eat with their fingers and to hold a spoon by the age of 12 months. Spoon control develops between 12 months and two years of age. Using a knife and fork comes later.

## **What Should Toddlers Eat?**

Toddlers can learn to eat what the rest of the family eat. This way they will get the nutrients they need for healthy development—protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins, minerals and water. Harder food should be mashed or cut into bite-sized portions. You may find that your toddler's appetite changes and worry that they are not eating enough. It is normal for children's appetite to fluctuate as their rate of growing varies. Toddlers can be fussy and may insist on one favourite food for every meal. Food fads like this are common and generally short-lived if you persevere with offering a variety of foods.

## **How To Set Up for Success**

### ***Get Everything You Need Ready***

Have everything ready before you bring your child to the high chair or table. This avoids having a hungry child waiting and protesting. If possible, use a high chair or booster seat at a table and unbreakable plates and cups. You might like to start with a special spoon designed for young children to use.

### ***Have Regular Mealtimes***

Set up a daily mealtime routine. It is ideal to serve three meals and a morning and afternoon snack at regular times each day. Try to avoid snacks before meals. Allow



a set time for meals, so they do not go on too long. Usually, twenty to thirty minutes is enough time for a toddler to eat a meal.

### ***Serve Manageable Portions***

Try not to serve more food than your child can manage. Serve small portions, and let your child ask for more if still hungry. Do not allow your child to fill up on drinks such as milk or fruit juice before or during meals.

### ***Be Prepared for Messy Eating***

Many parents struggle to stay calm when their toddler gets food everywhere. Try to remember that it is through trial and error that toddlers learn how to eat without help.

### ***Have Meals Together as a Family***

Toddlers learn a great deal about eating and mealtimes through watching others. Whenever possible, let your child eat at the table with the rest of the family.

## **Safety Tips**

- Always keep an eye on your child to prevent accidental falls from a highchair.
- Sit your child down whenever they are eating or drinking to reduce the risk of choking and to develop good eating habits.

- Avoid food that your child may have difficulty swallowing and may choke on, such as cherry tomatoes, nuts, hard sweets, raw vegetables and popcorn.

## **How To Encourage Independent Eating**

### ***Offer Finger-Foods***

If you have not already done so, start by teaching your child to eat with their fingers. They may let you know when they are ready to do this by trying to grab your spoon or plate. Put out foods that are easy to eat with fingers, such as bread squares, cheese segments or fruit pieces. Toddlers will often nibble on finger-food and allow you to feed them at the same time.

### ***Offer Your Child a Spoon***

Praise your child whenever they manage to get food on the spoon and into their mouth. You may need to gently guide your toddler through the actions of scooping and finding their mouth. Expect plenty of spills. When your child loses interest in using the spoon, continue to feed them yourself.

### ***Gradually Decrease Your Help***

As your child gets better at using a spoon, gradually decrease the amount of help you give. This allows your child to take more control over the meal, but may mean more mess at first.

### ***Introduce New Foods One at a Time***

To increase variety in your child's diet, introduce new foods one at a time. Start with small amounts of the new food along with familiar, accepted ones. Name the new food and praise your child for trying it.

### ***Encourage Your Child for Good Eating***

Pay attention to your child when they use a spoon, sit still in the high chair, or try a new food. Smile and touch them and say what they are doing well—*James, that's good eating, you're chewing really well.*

## ***Try Not To Encourage Problem Behaviour***

Do not laugh or give extra attention if your child spits food out, refuses to eat or throws food or utensils. If a problem arises, remove food and utensils and turn your head away (but do not leave the room). Wait until the behaviour has stopped, then look at your child and offer food again. If your child continues to refuse, do not try to force them. At the end of the set mealtime, remove the food and offer food again at the next regular meal or snack time.

### **Key Steps**

- Get everything ready before mealtimes.
- Have a regular mealtime routine.
- Offer manageable portions.
- Introduce new foods one at a time.
- Praise your child for eating and behaving well.
- Try not to encourage problem behaviour.

***See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions, concerns about you child's progress or development, or would like information on your child's diet, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.***



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