



MEALTIME SUCCESS (Structured Mealtimes for Happy, Healthy Babies and Toddlers)

Both you and your child want mealtimes to be as pleasant as possible. And you want to be sure he or she eats enough healthy foods to help him or her grow and develop as he should. It's a big step to go from bottle or breast feeding every 3 or 4 hours to having a regular schedule of 3 meals and 2 snacks a day. Therefore, successful feeding begins with the first introduction of solid foods.

Once your child is a toddler, it can be a challenge to stick to a mealtime schedule. At this time, he is learning how to feed himself and may not want your help. And he may not always want to eat when you want him to. Often he would rather play than sit down and eat a healthy meal. But learning good mealtime habits is very important, and will benefit your child for the rest of his life. Here is a plan for structuring mealtimes and helping your child to learn these important new habits:

1. Ready

Every child is different. Before starting to feed solid foods, check to see if your baby is ready. Your child will give you cues. You just need to look for them. Your baby is ready for solid foods when he:

- Is able to keep his tongue in the mouth most of the time unless he is sticking it out on purpose.
- Watches you eat and acts like he wants to eat also.
- Can stay in a sitting position with you holding him only low at the hips. If you have to hold your baby at the waist to keep him from falling forward, backward, or to the side, then he is not ready for solid foods.



Picture 1 Structured mealtimes are good for the whole family.

Most babies can usually do these three things by the time that they are 4 to 6 months old. Some infants, especially premature babies, may not be ready until they are older. Feeding schedules should follow the child's corrected age if premature. We continue to correct for prematurity until 2 years of age. Remember to check your baby's readiness cues before you start solid foods.

2. Start

- Start with one meal per day. Pick the time that the baby is most hungry so he will be more likely to eat new foods. Once your baby is eating solid foods well, you can add another meal.
- He or she should still be taking breast milk or formula several times per day. That is the main source of nutrition for all infants.

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Start, continued

- As your baby ages and eats better, you can give 2 and then 3 meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner. This can be at your family’s mealtime. The baby will still need formula or breast milk until he is at least 1 year old.
- Infants can start mashed table foods or soft foods around 8 months to 12 months of age. For premature babies, a set feeding schedule begins later because we use their corrected ages.
- By starting your baby with a mealtime plan early, he or she will already be on the road to success and used to a schedule of 3 meals and 2 to 3 snacks a day.

3. Limit mealtimes to 30 minutes.

Many parents think that if their child just sits in the high chair long enough, he will finish the food that’s put in front of him. But dragging out the mealtime just frustrates your child. And it could start a “battle of wills” that nobody wins. Thirty minutes is plenty of time for your child to get enough calories and nutrition.

4. Don’t give in to a “picky eater.”

If your child refuses the healthy foods you give him, end the meal on time. Don’t give him food again until the next scheduled meal or snack. This will teach your child that he needs to eat the food you provide at the time it is given. **This is a very valuable lesson for your child to learn.** If he doesn’t eat at mealtime, he will just be hungrier for the next meal. And there’s a good chance he’ll eat what’s provided next time.

- Plan a week’s menu for 3 healthy meals and 2 snacks per day. Then **stick to your menu, even if your child refuses some meals.**
- It sometimes helps to plan activities for the week to occupy your child in between the new mealtimes. Plan outside activities when possible, such as a trip to the park, playing outside, or a special bike ride (Picture 2). Getting your child out of the kitchen area where old favorites are close by can help to reduce a hungry toddler’s temper tantrums when he has just refused his healthy meal.
- Keep your child out of the kitchen and away from tempting favorites like cookies or chips. Better yet, remove them from the home for a while. This way you can show him, “Look, no more cookies here.”
- For older toddlers, you can use a sticker chart to reward good eating. Let your child put the sticker on the chart himself.
- If your picky eater is extra stubborn, you may have to take away the two snack times for awhile. That way she will be even hungrier when mealtime comes. This is especially true when starting new, “difficult” foods like vegetables or meats. Once he accepts the new foods, you can re-start the two snack times.



Picture 2 Plan activities to make this time fun for your child.

5. Control eating and drinking between meals and snacks.

Give **only water** in between meal and snack times. Don’t allow “grazing” or walking around with a bottle or cup of milk or juice. It actually helps to let your child’s hunger build up a little. When mealtime comes, a very hungry child is more likely to accept the foods you want him to eat.

6. Have a “sit to eat” policy.

Eating should always be done while seated at the table or in the highchair. There are several good reasons for this:

- This is an ideal time for you and your child to interact and have pleasant talk. Our lives are so busy these days it’s sometimes hard to make the time to talk with our children. Having set times to sit down and eat each day helps with family communication.
- It’s easier to stick to the 30-minute structured time frame if your child is not walking around carrying food or drinks and “grazing” all day.
- Sitting to eat is the safest position for your child. Avoid lying down while eating or drinking because it is unsafe. Walking or running while eating can be a choking hazard.

7. Serve nutritious, well-balanced meals.

Each day, offer foods from all 5 food groups:

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| ▪ Grains (breads and cereals) | ▪ Protein (meat, fish, dried beans and poultry) |
| ▪ Vegetables | ▪ Dairy (milk, yogurt and cheese). |
| ▪ Fruits | |

This balanced diet provides the nutrients your child needs to grow and develop as he should. Give milk with meals to make sure he gets enough calcium for strong bones and teeth. 100% fruit juice may be given for snacks (limit to 4 to 6 ounces per day). Water is good anytime.

8. Watch for signs of dehydration (getting dried out).

During the changeover to new liquids, it’s important to watch for signs that your child isn’t getting enough to drink. Call your child’s doctor if you notice any of these signs:

- Child does not urinate (pass water) for 8 hours or more (at least twice a day for toddlers and 3 times a day for infants)
- No tears when child cries; eyes look “sunken”
- Mouth feels dry or sticky
- Breathing is hard or fast
- An infant’s “soft spot” on top of the head is flat or “pulls in”
- Child is hard to wake up, acts confused, or doesn’t know what he’s doing

Weigh your child often and watch for weight gain or loss. To make sure the weight information is correct, try to weigh him at about the same time each day. Use the same scale each time, and remove your child’s clothing before weighing.