

Parenting Revolution

Toddler Edition

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ACTIVITY SHEET



The eating habits of young children can have a profound influence on development. However, when it comes to eating well, toddlers have a reputation of being fussy and difficult to feed. An estimated 20% of toddlers fall into a category known as 'picky eaters'. While most toddlers naturally outgrow this initial fussy period, in the midst of battle, it can be very stressful. To minimise stress and battle fatigue, healthy habits need to be cultivated. Beyond healthy foods, this session aims to help you create a healthy dinner-table dynamic.



PROGRAM DESIGN AND OBJECTIVES SUMMARY

This session is designed to help you:

- (a) understand the learned behaviours of eating and food association
- (b) foster positive feelings and attitudes towards mealtime
- (c) deal with fussy or picky eaters

Factors for Flourishing

Your toddler needs a balanced diet packed with vitamins, minerals, complex carbohydrates and proteins. In a perfect world, your child would gobble it all down without complaining (displaying polite table manners) and be grateful you provide them with such nutritious meals. That's the stuff dreams are made of. The reality is that toddlers often resist healthy foods, take forever to eat their meal, are demanding of what they want and generally unappreciative of what you give them.



When it comes to mealtime, how well is your family functioning? ✓

	None of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
My toddler has a good appetite				
My toddler has healthy nutritious meals prepared for them				
My toddler stays well hydrated (drinking plenty of water)				
My toddler eats up what they are given				
I limit the amount of sweets/lollies/candy my toddler has				
My toddler doesn't spill their food on the table/floor				
My toddler is willing to try new foods				
My toddler eats at a good pace (not too fast/slow)				
Apart from occasional treats, I don't give my toddler junk food				
My toddler enjoys mealtime				

UP TO 20% OF TODDLERS WILL RESIST NEWLY INTRODUCED FOODS, PREFERRING ONLY A SMALL VARIETY OF 'FAVOURITE FOODS'. UNFORTUNATELY, FAVOURITE FOODS TYPICALLY INCLUDE THE MORE TASTY AND LESS NUTRITIOUS FOODS. THEREFORE, IT'S MORE IMPORTANT TO:

(A) or (B)

LET YOUR TODDLER EAT WHAT THEY LIKE (EVEN IF IT'S CHICKEN NUGGETS FOR BREAKFAST, LUNCH AND DINNER)?

ONLY OFFER HEALTHIER OPTIONS BUT RUN THE RISK OF 'HANGRY' (HUNGRY + ANGER) MELTDOWNS?

Answer on next page

WHILE IT MIGHT BE EASIER IN THE SHORT TERM TO GIVE IN TO YOUR TODDLER'S DEMANDS FOR MORE TASTY, LESS NUTRITIOUS ALTERNATIVES (FOR THE SAKE OF AVOIDING MELTDOWNS), THIS ONLY SERVES TO REINFORCE POOR EATING HABITS OVER THE LONG TERM. 'PICKY EATING' HABITS OFTEN RESULTS IN NUTRITION DEFICIENCIES - INCLUDING IRON, CALCIUM, ZINC, AND VITAMINS. IF TODDLERS DON'T GET THE NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR A GROWING BODY AND DEVELOPING BRAIN, THEY BECOME SUSCEPTIBLE TO ILLNESSES AND VULNERABLE TO HEALTH ISSUES LATER IN LIFE.

Healthy toddlers do not starve!

HUNGRY CHILDREN TEND EAT WHAT IS PLACED IN FRONT OF THEM.



<p>Provide healthy food options for your child to eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner <i>(Toddlers will learn to choose between healthy option A or healthy option B, and eat healthy)</i></p>	<p>If refusing healthy food, don't provide unhealthy food options as an alternative <i>(Toddlers will quickly learn to hold out for the tastier food options, and refuse all others)</i></p>
<p>Present the same healthy stable foods, even if your child doesn't prefer the taste <i>(When food is presented consistently, your toddler will develop a taste for it and enjoy it)</i></p>	<p>Don't eliminate healthy staple foods just because your child doesn't prefer the taste <i>(Acquiring a taste for certain foods takes time. Giving up prematurely reinforces 'fussy eating')</i></p>
<p>If your child refuses to eat, place their food in the refrigerator for later. <i>(By re-present their food when hungry later on, they learn to eat what they are given).</i></p>	<p>If your child refuses to eat, don't debate, punish or force feed your toddler <i>(This serves to escalate stress levels and create negative associations with mealtimes)</i></p>

Introducing New Foods

Consistent exposure to new fruits and vegetables prior to the age of two is associated with lower levels of fussy eating. Repeated exposure (including having food on the plate, seeing food in picture books, or songs about food) leads to familiarity. The more familiar food becomes, the more willing your toddler will be to try it. Children may need to try a particular food several times before they become accustomed to it, so be patient and keep persevering.

01

BITE SIZE

To help reduce anxiety, offer a taste instead of a portion. *For example, 1x cherry tomato, 1x sliver of cucumber or 1x teaspoon of apple sauce.*

02

VARY PRESENTATION

Present new food in three different ways and ask which style they like best. *For example, (a) plain peas, (b) peas with gravy, or (c) mashed peas.*

03

MIX 'N' MATCH

Introduce new healthy foods together with familiar favourites. *For example, add blueberries (new) to muffins or pancakes (familiar favourites).*

04

MAKE IT A TRADITION

Make trying new healthy foods a fun family tradition (on a regular night of the week). *For example, "Try it Tuesday" or "New Food Friday"*

05

NOVEL LOCATIONS

Try healthy foods in fun locations, making the whole experience novel (not just the taste). *For example, trying a strawberry down in the garden.*

06

MODEL ENJOYMENT

Modelling enjoyment of a new healthy food creates intrigue and peaks your child's interest. *For example, <PARENT> "Oh wow, yum! Mmmm. I love this flavour. Here, try this..."*

07

ELEVATE TO 'SPECIAL' STATUS

Give new healthy foods 'special meaning' by the presentation and words used to describe it. *For example, fish oil capsules are "fishy lollies" given as a reward.*

08

ADD FLAVOUR

When introducing new healthy foods, make them as tasty as possible (but keep it healthy). *For example, drizzle a little honey on steamed carrots*

09

GET CREATIVE

Sing a song, perform a play or introduce some kind of creative art that relates to the food. *For example, perform a rap and a dance or introduce puppets to 'role play' eating the food.*

10

PRACTICE GRATITUDE

Pray a prayer or sing a song of thanks for the new food that's about to be tasted. *For example, thank God for the farmer, the cook, and the yummy flavour.*

Introducing New Foods

The taste buds of toddlers are geared towards certain flavours (sweet and savoury) and repelled by others (sour and bitter). However, your child will typically eat according to what is 'normal' within their environment. For example, Indian children learn to enjoy spicy curry; German children eat fermented sour cabbage; and Japanese children are accustomed to eating raw fish. Not only can your child learn to eat almost anything (through repeated exposure), but they can also learn healthy mealtime dynamics.



What healthy dynamics could you institute as 'normal' in the context of your family? ✓

Eating dinner at the dining room table		Having vegetables with every evening meal		Fruit and nuts make for great snack food	
Trying new foods on a consistent basis		Commitment to eating nutritious food		Fun family interactions with food	
Eating meals together as a family		Less processed and more plant-based food		Thanking God for food (appreciation)	

EATING AND DIGESTING FOOD IS AN INNATE, BIOLOGICAL PROCESS. HOWEVER, THE WAY A TODDLER EATS IS LEARNED BEHAVIOUR. SOCIAL MODELLING IS ONE OF THE FASTEST WAYS CHILDREN ADOPT CULTURAL 'NORMS'. AS SUCH, THE WAY YOUR CHILD EATS WILL BE LARGELY DEPENDENT ON

THE WAY YOU EAT!

Mealtime Routines

The dining room table provides unique opportunities for social modelling. By creating consistent mealtime routines, you create a sense of predictability for your toddler, which in turn, fosters emotional stability. Mealtime routines not only reduce your toddler's stress levels, but they also build positive associations with food and family.



What could you include in your family's mealtime routines for breakfast, lunch and dinner?

BREAKFAST

WHEN?	WHERE?	WITH WHOM?	WHAT?	HOW?
<i>Nominate a time</i>	<i>Preferred location</i>	<i>Family members</i>	<i>Food types</i>	<i>Fun activities</i>

LUNCH

WHEN?	WHERE?	WITH WHOM?	WHAT?	HOW?
<i>Nominate a time</i>	<i>Preferred location</i>	<i>Family members</i>	<i>Food types</i>	<i>Fun activities</i>

DINNER

WHEN?	WHERE?	WITH WHOM?	WHAT?	HOW?
<i>Nominate a time</i>	<i>Preferred location</i>	<i>Family members</i>	<i>Food types</i>	<i>Fun activities</i>

Get Your Toddler Involved

Getting your toddler involved in mealtime preparation can be a simple and effective way of increasing familiarity with food. Familiarity, in turn, helps reduce anxiety and resistance when it comes to eating. The more involved your toddler is in helping you prepare food, the greater 'ownership' they will feel over mealtime and be motivated to eat well.



How can you get your toddler involved in every step of the meal preparation process?

SHOPPING.

What creative ways could you involve your toddler in selecting produce to buy?

EXAMPLE: 'First to find the carrots' game or 'counting pieces of fruit' as they are put into the bag

DECIDING.

What creative ways could you involve your toddler in deciding what to cook for dinner?

EXAMPLE: Choice between carbonara (white) or bolognaise (red); Select three vegetables to add

PREPPING.

What creative ways could you involve your toddler in getting food ready for cooking?

EXAMPLE: Washing the potatoes, oiling the tray and pressing the mixer button

COOKING.

What creative ways could you involve your toddler in cooking meals?

EXAMPLE: Stirring the pot (or provide a bowl and spoon to mimic you); Lick the spoon - taste test

CLEANING.

What creative ways could you involve your toddler in cleaning up after the meal?

EXAMPLE: Wiping the table; turning the tap on and squeezing in the "bubble" dishwashing liquid

Have Fun

Mealtimes have the potential to cause a lot of stress and anxiety (for both toddlers and parents). Subconsciously, your toddler will pick up on whatever you're feeling. The more stressed and frustrated you become, the more emotional and defiant they are likely to be. So, where possible, plan to make every mealtime experience as positive as possible.

Match each scenario with the best fitting mealtime-hack (to change the dynamic):

SCENARIO

Your toddler is uncertain about a trying a new food

Your child is over excited about the meal they helped make

Your toddler doesn't seem their usual happy self

Your toddler is feeling anxious about dinner

It took lots of time to make dinner that your child rejected

You've had a most busy and exhausting day

Your toddler has just knocked their dinner bowl off the table

Your toddler appears grumpy, overtired and is unwilling to eat

Your toddler is taking an excessively long time to eat

MEALTIME-HACK

Have toddler close their eyes to pray for the meal

Quiz: Correctly answer = 1 bite. Incorrect answer = 2 bites.

Tell a joke. Share a riddle. Make some funny animal noises

Take turns in sharing highlights of the day

Let your child touch and play with their food

Play some soothing music or sing a song

Focus on enjoying your own meal

Sing a lullaby or say a prayer and transfer to bed

Pretend to have a food fight (make light of the situation)

BY KEEPING YOUR EMOTIONS CALM AND THE ATMOSPHERE FUN, YOU ENHANCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF YOUR CHILD BEING RELAXED AND COOPERATIVE.

Messy Play

Strange as it may sound, allowing your toddler to engage in some good old messy play can actually help to reduce their fussiness with food! For many, aversion to new and unfamiliar foods has to do with texture (the feel of the food in their mouth). By allowing your child to play with their food (using their hands) they become familiar with the texture - making it less scary to explore these textures in their mouth.

To help fussy eaters turn fear into fun, here are some ideas for messy play:

Smear yoghurt over their plate and allow them to lick it off



Smear tomato-paste/ sauce on pizza base and decorate with toppings of their choice



Play with set jelly (incorporate plastic figurines and take an imaginary swim in the jelly pool)



Thread cooked spaghetti strands through a cup handle to make a waterfall or slippery slide



Squish banana in hands to form a paste (in preparation for baking banana bread/cake)



Gradual Exposure for Extra-Sensitive Toddlers

The aim of gradual exposure is to gently desensitise extra-sensitive toddlers to new foods by slowly increasing their interaction with the ingredient. Start out with the easiest possible step (e.g. looking at a new food on a plate). As your child becomes comfortable and inquisitive, transition to a more difficult step (e.g. having it touch other food on the plate or poking it with a fork). Over time, they will become more familiar and confident touching, playing, and smelling, before eventually reaching the end goal of tasting and eating.










NOTE:

It's important that you set small, realistic goals. Some children move through their exposure hierarchy quickly (minutes/hours), whereas others take longer (days/weeks). There is no right or wrong speed - simply let your child lead you and stay at your child's pace (even if they can only manage baby steps). Choose one hierarchy at a time (start with an easier food first) and provide positive reinforcement (encouragement and reward) each time they complete a step.

Exposure Hierarchy

TARGET:	<i>EXAMPLE: A new food to eat</i>
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Identify 8 'bite size' goals to master, and 8 rewards to be given once mastered. Starting with the easiest task (Goal 1) and work your way down the list. Each time a goal is mastered (completed successfully 3 times), colour the star and move on to the next level:

GOAL 1	<i>EXAMPLE: Tolerate 'target food' on plate for 2 minutes</i>	Reward	
GOAL 2	<i>EXAMPLE: Keep 'target food' on plate for entire meal; poke with fork</i>	Reward	
GOAL 3	<i>EXAMPLE: Move 'target food' to touch other food on the plate</i>	Reward	
GOAL 4	<i>EXAMPLE: Pick up 'target food' in hands, feel its texture</i>	Reward	
GOAL 5	<i>EXAMPLE: Bring 'target food' to lips and kiss it goodbye</i>	Reward	
GOAL 6	<i>EXAMPLE: Smell, lick and taste 'target food'</i>	Reward	
GOAL 7	<i>EXAMPLE: Hold 'target food' in mouth (can spit it out after)</i>	Reward	
GOAL 8	<i>EXAMPLE: Chew and swallow 'target food'</i>	Reward	



NOTE:

This exposure hierarchy chart can also be used to overcome other common childhood fears (ranging from fear of the toilet to fear of the dark). Therefore, keep this chart handy for future sessions.