

Questions & Answers about avoiding mealtime hassles

Mealtimes sometimes become battlegrounds when parents insist that children clean their plates or finish all of their peas. Mealtimes are special times for families to gather together. Parents who provide healthy meals but go with the flow and relax at mealtime, avoid power struggles with their children. These parents know that eating is one of the few areas where young children feel they have control, and their budding independence can easily lead to power struggles with parents. There are several things parents can do to promote cooperation and harmony at the dinner table. Remember the more you work with your children—not against them—the better they will eat and the more peaceful mealtimes will be for everyone.

1. One day my son is constantly hungry. The next he may hardly touch his food. Then he gets on food jags and only wants to eat cereal for several days. Should I be concerned?

Children's appetites may vary from day to day, and children often eat in spurts. While some children may be able to eat regular meals, others may need several small meals through the day. Give children credit that they will eat when they are hungry. It's also common for

children to get on food jags and want the same thing to eat meal after meal. It's important to learn your child's likes and dislikes and *not overreact* when he won't eat or wants his favorite cereal three meals in a row. As long as your child is growing and healthy, he or she is probably doing fine. If you have concerns about your child's growth rate or health, see your doctor.

2. My children only seem to want to eat peanut butter sandwiches, hot dogs, and

macaroni and cheese. They turn up their noses at anything new. How can I get them to try new foods?

Try offering one of these favorites at each meal, but add new foods in a balanced diet as well. If new foods are served often, they become more familiar and children may be more willing to try them. Encourage—but do not insist—that children try new foods. You can also present new foods in small, bite-size portions and provide dipping sauces your child likes. This may make the foods more appealing.

3. My father made me clean my plate as I was growing up. Should I insist that my son do the same?

Trust your child to decide when he has had enough to eat. Pushing food may force a child to ignore his body signals and overeat. Insisting that children clean their plates can also lead to a power struggle.

4. The only way I can get my daughter to eat vegetables is to bribe her with dessert. Is this okay?

Using dessert as a reward can make children less likely to eat

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healthful foods like carrots and broccoli. It can also cause your child to develop eating problems later on. Offer a variety of vegetables to give your child some choice. If you do want to reward your child for eating vegetables, make the prize non-food related such as watching a video or a trip to the park after dinner.

5. My children want all the junk food they see advertised on television. I know it's not healthy. What should I do?

Avoid buying junk food and foods containing lots of sugar when you go to the grocery store. Offer children balanced meals and healthful snacks with an occasional treat, but avoid making these foods part of their everyday diet.

6. My three-year-old daughter likes to play with her food instead of eating at the table, and then later complains of being hungry.

What should I do?

Not all children will eat at scheduled mealtimes; they may get hungry at different times. If your child doesn't seem hungry when it's time to eat, remove her plate and allow her to draw pictures or do a quiet activity while the family shares dinner. If she gets hungry later, warm up her dinner or offer a healthy snack.

7. My four-year-old twins are so picky about what they will eat that I worry

about their diet. What can I do?

There are many ways you can add variety and make foods fun, such as:

- Make smiley faces on foods.
- Add cheese to vegetables or other foods.
- Cut sandwiches into shapes with cookie cutters.
- Make juice-sicles by freezing juice in ice trays using Popsicle sticks.

Letting children help shop for groceries and plan, prepare, and serve meals can also help take some of the struggle out of eating. Children may be more willing to eat meals that they have helped to prepare.

Providing healthful snacks can also help your child maintain a balanced diet and proper weight.

- Set out ingredients and let children put together their own snacks.
- Keep fruit and other nutritious snacks available for children.
- Give children choices—“Would you prefer carrots or apple slices?”
- Don't allow snacks to take the place of meals.

Remember that most picky eaters will change their eating habits over time, but this will usually happen much sooner if parents avoid power struggles over food.

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