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Toddlers @ The Table: The Power Struggle

Toddlers are learning to navigate their world, communicate, and exert control over aspects of their lives. They don't actually have control over much, but eating is one of the first areas they will master. Parents can help them enjoy their limited power by giving them appropriate amounts of freedom when it comes to choosing foods and eating them. That's not to say toddlers are deciding what to have for dinner. Parents have the important job of providing the kinds of foods that an active toddler needs. A parent's role is to present healthy foods and let the child decide which ones to eat — or whether to eat at all.

Most Toddlers Are Picky Eaters

Many toddlers express their budding independence through eating — or not eating, as the case may be. So nearly all toddlers could be described as picky eaters. If kids don't like a food, they won't eat it — no rocket science there.

Does your toddler want to eat only macaroni and cheese? When a child is stuck on one food, a parent might feel forced to serve that food every day so the child eats something. But eventually the child may tire of that food — and then what?

You choose the foods on your toddler's plate — and you don't have to serve macaroni and cheese daily. If you do, you miss an opportunity to introduce new foods and increase the number of those your child is willing to eat. Most "food jags," as they're sometimes called, won't last long if parents don't accommodate them.

Kids won't starve and they will learn to be more flexible rather than go hungry. Present a variety of healthy foods — including established favourites

and some new foods — to make up the menu. Your toddler may surprise you one day by eating all of them.

And be sure you're setting a good example! Serve nutritious foods that you like or eat something new so your kids see you enjoying what you're asking them to eat

Don't Bargain for Bites

For some kids, dinner becomes a negotiation session from the very start, and parents have been using dessert as an incentive for decades. But this doesn't encourage healthy eating. Instead it creates the impression that "treats" are more valuable than mealtime food. Foods like candy and cookies are not essential to your child's diet and it is not a deprivation to avoid serving them during the toddler years.

Threatening a punishment, much like bribing a child with dessert, ultimately isn't effective either. It creates a power struggle. To encourage healthy eating, continue offering your child an array of nutritious choices — and keep the mealtime mood upbeat.

Also try these strategies:

- **Serve right-sized portions.** Parents often overestimate how much food a child should eat. Especially with foods that aren't yet favourites, a couple of tablespoons is plenty to start with. Small portions are less overwhelming, while bigger portions may encourage overeating.

- **Don't negotiate.** It's fine to encourage kids to "try one bite" but don't fall into the negotiating trap. Prepare and serve healthy meals and let them decide what to eat.

- **Have family meals together.** Set your toddler's place at the family table — it's good for kids of this age to see their parents and siblings eating together and eating healthy foods. Kids eat a more

nutritious diet, with more fruits and vegetables, when they regularly have family meals.

- **Create positive peer pressure.** Toddlers are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables if they see their peers eating them, so look for opportunities where they can eat healthy with friends.

- **Let Kids Feed Themselves**
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- Kids should start finger feeding around 9 months of age and try using utensils by 15-18 months. Provide many opportunities for this, but make sure your toddler eats enough so that the experience doesn't lead to frustration. Jump in to help when necessary, but pay attention to hunger cues and signs that your child is full. You can always offer more if your child still seems hungry, but you can't take the food back if you overfeed.
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- **Listen to Your Child**
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- Be alert to what toddlers say through their actions. A child who is building a tower of crackers or dropping carrots on the floor may be telling you he or she is full. Pushing food on a child who's not hungry may dull the internal cues that help kids know when they've eaten enough.
- But this doesn't mean that it's practical or advisable for kids to eat on demand all day long. Those who eat all day may not learn what it is like to be hungry or full. That's why structured meals and snack times are important.
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- **What If Kids Skip a Meal?**
- Many toddlers need to eat often — as much as six times a day, including three meals and two or three snacks. Keep this in mind as you establish a pattern of meal and snacks. But realize that a food schedule only sets the times that you will present food to your toddler. Your child may not take every opportunity to eat.
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- **Avoid the Junk Food Trap**
- Toddlers need to eat healthy to get the nutrients their growing bodies need. Candy, potato chips, and other low-nutrient "junk foods"

shouldn't be part of their diet because they can crowd out the healthy foods needed. Also, food preferences are established early in life, so don't miss opportunities to help your toddler develop a taste for nutritious foods.

Source: http://kidshealth.org