

Healthy eating and play for toddlers (1–2 years)

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For toddlers, the world is a fun and exciting place, as they begin to explore life independently. This is the time to encourage your child to enjoy family meals, try a wide variety of foods and tastes, as well as take part in daily play activities.

What do toddlers need to eat?

Toddlers should be served the same foods as the whole family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition.

Offer a variety of food from the following groups:

- fruits and vegetables
- breads and cereals
- meat, fish, chicken, eggs, legumes
- full cream milk, cheese and yoghurt.

Children will learn to eat what the family eats if they are given the same food and encouraged to try it.

Who is in charge at mealtimes?

Eating and mealtimes are a team effort, with control being shared between parents and their children.

Children can sense how much food their bodies need and will eat enough to match this, but they can lose this natural ability to sense when they are hungry or full, if forced to over-eat or finish all the food on their plate.

Parents and children have different mealtime roles within the family:

The parent's job is to decide:

- which foods to offer children
- when to offer food.

The children's job is to decide:

- whether they will eat
- how much they will eat.

My child seems to eat less than they used to

Children's eating patterns often change in the toddler years, and picky eating can be common. The world has become a new and exciting place for your toddler to explore, and food may be less important when there are so many other things to do.

There are some other reasons for these changes in eating:

Slower growth

Children do not grow as fast in their second year, which means toddlers often need less food and have smaller appetites.

The amount eaten from day to day can change dramatically. Although this change can be worrying for parents, it is normal and does not mean your child is being difficult or is unwell.

Fussy eating

Showing independence is part of normal toddler development and this often includes refusing to eat food. Refusing food does not always mean that your child does not like it – they may simply be testing to see the reaction they will get!

- Separate meals are not necessary; serve your toddler the same foods as the rest of the family.
- Offer new foods in a calm and relaxed environment with foods your child already eats.
- Remove distractions by turning off the television and putting toys out of reach.
- Seat your toddler at the table to eat with the family whenever possible, so they learn by watching and copying others.
- Offer food at several meals if refused the first time – it can take several attempts for children to accept new foods.
- Offer small serves to start and give more if needed.
- Give words of encouragement, but don't force your child to eat.
- Don't assume your child will dislike a particular food.
- Let your child explore food by touching – and prepare for some mess!
- Let your child feed themselves and give help if needed.
- Remove food after 20 minutes or so, if your child has lost interest.
- Less healthy snacks such as chocolate or ice cream should not be offered as alternatives or bribes. Children will quickly learn to refuse healthy options in preference for these foods.
- Be a positive role model, eat well and your child will copy you.

Grazing and snacking

Many toddlers do not follow a traditional meal pattern, but prefer to have small, regular snacks instead. This grazing style suits small stomachs and provides a steady intake of energy to keep toddlers on the go. Try to offer nutritious snacks that include fruits, milk products and wholegrain cereals.

As a guide, plan for your toddler to have three main meals (these may only be small) and two to three snacks per day. Try and encourage 1 1/2–2 hours between each meal or snack.



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What should I offer my child to drink?

Children from 1–2 years may still be breastfeeding. All other drinks for toddlers should be offered in a cup.

If on offer, some children may fill up on drinks, particularly sweet ones like juice, leaving little room for solid food. Drinking sweet drinks regularly can also increase risk of excess weight gain and tooth decay.

- Give food first, then drinks at mealtimes and snacks.
- Offer up to three glasses of full fat milk per day and water at other times. Reduced fat milk and dairy products can be offered to children over two years of age. Skim milk and dairy products are not suitable for children under five.
- Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not needed.

When should I worry about eating?

Many parents worry about their child's eating, particularly in younger children when food intake and appetite appear to be different every day. Remember this is normal toddler eating behavior. However, you should ask for professional help if:

- you are worried about your child's growth or health
- your child is unwell, tired and not eating
- mealtimes are causing lots of stress and anxiety.

Active play

Active play is important for a toddler's development. Benefits of regular active play include:

- building strong hearts and bones
- strengthening muscles and developing good posture
- maintaining a healthy weight
- improving sleep
- making friends
- developing basic movement skills
- encouraging good coordination.

Simple, free outdoor play is ideal for toddlers. Play materials such as tyres, large soft beach balls and cardboard boxes encourage imagination and provide opportunities for learning. Finding great places for toddlers to play can be as simple as finding some sand, water, leaves or stones. Imitating other people being active and moving to music offers fun and learning for toddlers.

Encourage activity and play everyday

Suggested for toddlers:

- A minimum of 30 minutes planned active play per day, such as play groups, swim and dance classes.
- At least 60 minutes and up to several hours per day of unstructured, free play.
- No more than 60 minutes a day should be spent sitting or lying still at a time, with the exception of sleep.
- For toddlers under two years, screen time including television and computers is not recommended.

- For children over two years, screen time should be kept to a minimum, less than two hours a day and under the supervision of a parent or carer. Children may benefit from educational opportunities offered by media-based activities.
- Avoid television as a form of play – offer blocks or a simple game instead.
- Children older than two years should not be completely dependent on a stroller, let your child walk short distances. If taking a long trip, break it up with play stops.
- As a family try walking instead of taking the car, when possible.
- Create family rules around how much inactive time is allowed and enforce active time together.
- Ask other family members, including grandparents and carers, to support the family rules you set.

Important tips for toddler eating and play

- Toddlers' appetite and food intake can vary daily.
- Toddlers need small meals and regular snacks.
- Encourage your child to eat meals with the family.
- Let them tell you they are full; don't force a child to finish all food on the plate.
- Parents decide what food to offer and when to offer it.
- Children decide whether they will eat and how much.
- New foods may be rejected at first – be patient and keep offering.
- Let children feed themselves; be on hand if help is needed.
- Offer all drinks in a cup.
- Sweet drinks such as fruit juice, cordial and soft drink are not necessary.
- Young children should always be seated and supervised when eating.
- Avoid small hard foods such as nuts and hard lollies.
- Activities such as dancing and visiting the playground should add up to at least an hour of daily active play time.
- You do not always need to join in play – provide a safe space which you can supervise.
- Find opportunities for play with other children and use outdoor free play in your neighborhood when you can.
- Keep active play items handy for when leaving the house, in case an opportunity to play arises.
- Limit inactive time such as sitting in front of a screen.

Photograph by Fiona Basile.

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