

FAMILY WELLNESS

Encouraging Healthy Meals from the Start

- Setting family meal expectations
- Tips for caregivers
- Resources to make it easier



What could mealtime look like for your family? Family expectations can set you up for success.

All caregivers crave the sitcom-perfect family dinner table with children happily eating the healthy, homemade food set before them. In reality, meals are more chaotic and full of high-level negotiations for most families. Setting expectations with your children can help balance the desire for healthy meals and the developmental capabilities your children have.

Developmentally appropriate expectations--like sitting at the table for only 10 minutes, for younger

children, or the whole meal for older children--will set your family up for a happy meal. Providing children with a "safe and healthy alternate" after family meal time, like a scrambled egg, will relieve worries that your child may feel when the family meal isn't what they want to eat. Keeping meal time focused on conversations and relationships, rather than negotiating foods, will support a happy and pressure-free meal time.

Tips for Caregivers

Make meals happier and healthier.

Include children in cooking and shopping.

Even very young children can help pick produce at the store, chop soft foods, dump pre-measured ingredients, and stir foods together. Being a part of this process will encourage your child to enjoy their hard work by eating the meal!

Give children "tasting plates" of ingredients.

Young children generally feel suspicious of foods that are mixed together, like casseroles. When cooking, set aside cooked ingredients to plate for your child separately, as well as providing a small portion of the finished meal. By seeing ingredients separately, your child will be more likely to try new foods.

Avoid "if-thens".

Requiring children to eat "healthy" foods before they are able to have "dessert" can set children up for unhealthy relationships with food. On the occasions that dessert is available, avoid requiring children to "earn" the food. Instead, celebrate and enjoy it together!

Make sure every meal has a "friendly food".

When planning meals, be sure to include a favorite food on each plate. Seeing something familiar and enjoyable, like apples, alongside a new food will encourage your child to try the new food without feeling distress.

Trust your child's metabolism.

Young children metabolize food differently than adults, and may eat LOTS of food one day and then very little food the next. This is normal and healthy. Trust your child when they tell you they are full or hungry rather than pressuring to them to eat or not allowing more food when they've "just had a snack".

"There should be joy in feeding and in eating."

– DR. JILL CASTLE, DIETICIAN

Resources

For continued support

- Visit our [5-4-3-2-1 Go!® site](#) for family resources to support children getting 5 fruits and veggies, 4 glasses of water, and 3 servings of dairy daily.
- [Jill Castle](#) is a nutritionist with excellent information and books for families.
- [Feeding Littles](#) has great information and online classes for families
- [The Gentle Eating Book](#) by Sarah Ockwell Smith offers child development-informed approaches to meal times
- Watch a [recorded webinar](#) with our Youth Wellness Coordinator with more tips for happy meals!

