

VEGETABLES V I R T U E

Family Food Rules

1. Maintain a Division of Responsibility:

- **The adult determines WHEN to eat:** Kids tummies are small, so space meals and snacks no more than 2-3 hours apart (depending on age and activity-level). Adjust accordingly to a child's appetite and daily schedule at school, with sports, etc.
- **The adult determines WHAT to eat:** Focus on nutrient-dense foods first; then make less nutritious options available on occasion or as additions to a meal. Aim to always offer at least one food the child *loves*, at least one food the child *likes*, and at least one food the child *is learning* to enjoy (either because it is still unfamiliar or remains unfavored).
- **The adult determines WHERE to eat:** Make it clear where meals and snacks are to be eaten (ie. at the table and/or counter, ideally) and articulate when an exception is okay (ie. outside, in the car, etc.). This helps minimize the risk for choking (from eating + playing in young kids) and sets up more clear boundaries when it's time to eat.
- **The child determines IF they'll eat:** With healthy kids (who don't have underlying medical concerns inhibiting food intake), allow them to decide if they will eat. With the above love it/like it/learning it foods offered, there is no need to be a short-order cook to accommodate finicky eaters.
- **The child determines HOW MUCH to eat:** Do NOT rally members for the clean plate club. Instead, empower your child to listen to their body's cues for hunger and fullness. Help them understand how long until they will eat again so they can eat accordingly for adequate energy.

2. **Expose + Explore:** Eating is not *always* the end goal. Repeatedly expose children to foods that are unfamiliar and/or not yet favored to expand what items they are interested in eating. If a food is unfamiliar but a child will smell, touch, or lick to taste it, applaud it! It is more productive to use an expose and explore approach than to implore a "polite bite."
3. **Use appropriate table talk:** Don't allow use of the words "yuck," "gross," or "disgusting." Instead, encourage child to share their likes and dislikes with age-appropriate and yet more polite expressions such as, "I don't care for this *today*," "this doesn't taste good to me *today*," etc. Avoid more permanent, negative labels over a food so the child has freedom to try it again another day and/or in a different way.
4. **Enforce realistic expectations:** Toddlers often can't sit at the table as long as adults. Encourage good behavior while eating and in enjoying family's company. When child is no longer able to maintain appropriate table manners, offer them the option to be excused. If they would like to return to the table, allow them to do so while the meal is still out/being shared by others. Otherwise, make clear that the meal is over when everyone is excused and the table is cleared. This discourages any inappropriate grazing.
5. **Do not use food as a reward or a punishment:** Do not use cake as the carrot in front of a child's nose. Dessert should not be contingent on how well they eat at a meal. Instead, determine when dessert will be shared by the family. Then, consider offering it alongside the rest of the meal (or at afternoon snack) to eliminate the fixation on it. If it is not a day for dessert, simply offer a time when your child could look forward to enjoying the requested treat on another day/night (ie. "How about we go get ice cream after school tomorrow," "We will have cake at Grandma's birthday this weekend," etc.).
6. **Teach manners:** Children need to learn how to stay in their seat, chew with their mouth closed, not talk with their mouths full, use inside voices at the table, say please and thank you, and ask for more politely. Rather than bombard children with each of these things at each meal, pick one or two to focus on each day - rotating through to establish each as a normative behavior.
7. **Remain confident when the kitchen is closed:** By maintaining regular, age-appropriate meal and snack times, children will learn to eat when food is offered (rather than grazing all day). If enforced, this allows children to become hungry between meals/snacks without ever feeling famished or insecure of when food will be offered again.
8. **Make eating a family activity:** Whenever possible, eat at the table with your child. Role model to them that meal times are a time to come together give thanks, fuel your bodies, share conversation, and enjoy the food before you. Starting as early as age two, consider serving meals family-style and help your children serve themselves at the table.
9. **Keep kids in the kitchen:** Whenever possible, don't kick kids out of the kitchen when it is time to prepare a meal. Instead, keep your eyes open for opportunities to engage little. Every meal has some component they can safely be included in.