Tips for happy mealtimes

Follow these tips for successful mealtimes with your child.

1. Let your child decide how much they are going to eat

> It is the parent/carer's job to decide *when food is offered* and *what type of food is offered*. The child can decide *if they are going to eat* and *how much they are going to eat.*

> Remember, "*parent provides* and *child decides*".

> Offer children a variety of healthy foods to choose from to encourage positive eating habits – include a variety of tastes, textures, shapes and smells.

> It is normal for a child's appetite to vary from meal to meal and day to day.

2. Avoid distraction during mealtimes

> Most children are easily distracted during a meal – turn off the television, put pets outside and tidy away toys so the child can focus on the meal.

> Use a highchair or booster seat to confine your child to the feeding environment.

3. Encourage your child's appetite

> Allow at least three hour intervals between main meals to encourage your child's appetite.

> Avoid using milk or juice as snacks – these will fill your child up too much.

> A mealtime schedule helps a child learn the routine of meals and about feeling hungry and then satisfied after a meal.

4. Eat with your child

> Mealtimes are important social times for your child and should bring the family together and strengthen relationships.

> Show your child you enjoy their company and talk about the day rather than focussing on food.

> Children enjoy eating with their parents and siblings and will often try new foods if they can see their parents or siblings eating the new food.

5. Be patient and calm

> Children eat to their appetite – if a meal is not finished remove any uneaten food without commenting – assume that your child has had enough to eat.

> Children are fascinated by parent's reactions to their behaviours - the less fuss you make about the food the better.

> Avoid bribing your child to eat – it is important for them to eat because they are hungry.

> Avoid becoming or appearing angry with your child during mealtimes.

6. Limit the duration of meals

> Meals should not last longer than 20-30 minutes. After this time whatever is not eaten should be removed without fuss.

7. Serve age-appropriate foods

> Offer food appropriate for your child's stage of development

> Use small helpings of food – a plate piled high with food can put a child off eating.

> Allow children to choose how much they want to eat – they can always ask for more.

> Healthy children are good at knowing how much to eat – avoid forcing them to eat everything on their plate.

8. Keep offering new foods

> Children are usually scared of new foods and may need to see a food 10 times or more before they decide to try it.

> Offer small amounts of a new food to try with foods your child already likes. Make sure your child can see you eating the new food too.

> Set a good example – show your child that you and your family enjoy eating a variety of healthy foods.

9. Encourage independent feeding

> Children over the age of nine months need regular opportunities to feed themselves.

> Children like to have some control over what they eat – offer some choice for your child at meal and snack times.

10. Tolerate mess

> Eating is messy.

> Allow your child to have food on their face and hands – do not wipe the mouth with a spoon or tissue after each mouthful.

> Use a sheet under the highchair to catch falling food.

11. Food experiences

> Children become more familiar with foods when they use them in activities.
  Eg. cooking, shopping and unpacking groceries.

> Children will sometimes try a new food away from the usual routine and environment.
  Eg. at the market, butcher, supermarket or on a picnic.

More information

Child and Youth Health (CYH) website:	**www.cyh.com**
Parent Helpline telephone:	**1300 364 100**
Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) website:	**www.daa.asn.au**

Produced by

Government
of South Australia

SA Health

Women's
& Children's
Hospital