

Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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Feeding Your Preschooler

Your child is now three or four years old. Are you having more problems at mealtime? Does it seem like your child won't eat anything anymore? You are not alone! You have a normal preschooler. The reason your child may not be as hungry is that a preschooler is not growing as fast as before.

As they grow older, children are less interested in food. They are more interested in what is happening around them. They want to learn and like to do things for themselves. (This might mean more spills at mealtime!) But they still need your help.

Parents need to give preschoolers regular meals and snacks. You provide the structure so that your child can learn and be successful.

Mealtime Tips

- **Make it easy for your child to eat.** The younger preschooler may need child-size spoons and forks, a smaller plate and cup, and a booster chair. Cut sandwiches and finger foods into small pieces.
- **Offer child-size servings.** Put small amounts of food on the child's plate and let the child ask for more if still hungry.
- **Avoid foods that could cause choking.** Small children can choke easily. Avoid round pieces of hot dogs, grapes, raw carrot chunks, popcorn, or nuts. Peanut butter and large pieces of meat can also be hard to swallow.

Include at least one of your child's favorite foods at each meal.

- **Offer different textures and colors.** This makes food more interesting and introduces your child to lots of different foods.
- **Keep mealtime quiet and calm.** Ask your child to speak softly and sit at the table. Turn off the television and radio. Keep the conversation pleasant and avoid arguments.
- **Serve meals and snacks at regular times.** Children need daily routines. Plan meals and snacks when your child is likely to be hungry and will not be tired or too excited.
- **Let your child help you.** Helping to grow, buy, or make food increases a child's interest in trying it.

What the Preschooler Can Do

Eating Skills:

- Chew foods with different textures.
- Handle a fork.
- Drink from a cup.

Preparation skills:

- Wash vegetables.
- Wipe tables and countertops.
- Unload the dishwasher.
- Place things in the trash.
- Put bread in the toaster.

- Break eggs in a bowl.
- Tear lettuce and toss salads.
- Measure and stir.
- Shape hamburgers and meatballs.
- Knead and shape dough.
- Peel bananas.
- Pour cereal.
- Clear their place at the table.
- Make sandwiches.

What to Expect

Putting food on the table doesn't mean your child will eat it. Many things affect what children will or will not eat.

Preschool children:

- Want to do things their way.
- Learn that eating or not eating a food can get attention from adults.
- Eat what those around them eat.
- Eat best when parents have control over available food, but are not too strict about the amounts to be eaten.
- Need a relaxed quiet mealtime.
- Eat less if they come to the table tired, excited, or in a bad mood.
- Like fun shapes, crisp food, and foods not too hot or too cold.

Children Eat What You Eat

You are an example for your child. If you hate broccoli, your child will not want to try it either. But don't be hard on yourself. Pick one or two habits to change and make more improvements when you are ready. You and your child will both benefit from your dietary improvements.

Food Jags

Preschoolers may want to eat the same food again and again. These are called "food jags." These

behaviors are common and they usually change or disappear in a few days or weeks.

To handle a food jag:

- Give the child attention that does not center on eating behaviors.
- Serve a variety of foods in small amounts.
- Include the favorite food in small amount as one of several choices.
- Don't bribe or threaten.
- Quietly remove the uneaten food at the end of the meal.
- Don't scold for not eating.

If you do this at every snack or meal, the child will learn mealtime is for eating--not for getting attention by being "fussy."

Feeding Responsibilities

The adult's job is to:

- Offer healthful foods to a child at regular times.

The child's job is to:

- Decide which foods to eat and how much.

Do not force your child to eat foods he or she doesn't want. This will only lead to a battle that neither of you can win. You must trust your child to eat enough food to grow well.

For More Information

The twelve issue series KIDS MEAL TIMES is available from Joan E. LeFebvre, University of Wisconsin-Extension Area Family Living Agent, 330 Court Street, Eagle River WI 54521.

Source: "Feeding Your Preschooler" and "Your Child's Food Behavior" KIDS MEALTIMES North Central Regional Extension Publications No. 598a and 598c. October 1996.

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 April, 1998

