



Helping your 1 to 3 year old child eat well

As a parent or caregiver, you can help your child learn important food skills and eating habits. You can also help shape positive attitudes towards food and eating. Healthy eating is about more than just what we eat. It's also about how we eat.

You and your child have different roles at meal and snack times. Your role is to decide what foods to offer, when to serve them and where. Your child's role is to decide whether and how much to eat from the foods you provide. Respecting these roles helps your child learn how to eat well and makes mealtimes more enjoyable.

What should I offer my child to eat?

Offer your child nutritious foods from an early age to help them develop healthy habits for life. Give your child foods with different flavours and textures. Include a variety of:

- **Vegetables and fruits** including fresh, frozen and canned
- **Whole grain foods** such as whole grain pasta and bread, oats, barley and quinoa
- **Protein foods** such as beans, peas, lentils, nut and seed butters, tofu, meat, fish, poultry, eggs and dairy products

What should I offer my child to drink?

Offer healthy drinks such as breastmilk, plain whole cow's milk and water. After age 2, other options include skim, 1% and 2% milk and plain fortified soy beverage.

Other fortified plant-based beverages such as almond and oat often have less energy and protein than soy. Only offer them if your child is over 2 and gets enough energy and protein from other nutritious foods.

Offer milk or fortified soy beverage at meals and snacks only, not in between. This helps your child come to the table hungry and ready to eat. Limit to no more than 3 cups (750 mL) each day. Give water between meals and snacks for thirst.

Don't give sugary drinks like 100% fruit juice, fruit flavored drinks, chocolate milk, or pop to your child. Offer unsweetened drinks instead. This can help your child learn to enjoy the taste of healthy drinks like water and plain milk.

How much food does my child need?

Every child is different. The amount of food they need varies based on their age, activity level, growth rate and appetite. It's normal for your child to eat more on some days than others. Your child's appetite can be affected by their mood, their health, the time of day and the food offered. Trust your child's appetite to guide them on whether to eat and how much.

Offer your child 3 small meals and 2 to 3 snacks, spaced about 2 to 3 hours apart. Try to serve meals and snacks at about the same time every day. Children who graze all day may not learn how it feels to be hungry or full and can have a harder time trusting their appetite.

What can I do to help my child eat well?

Sit and eat with your child

You are your child's best role model. Your child will learn about food and eating by watching you. Eating together also provides a time to connect with each other.

Offer new foods often

Offer foods your child likes to eat along with a new food for them to try. Sometimes young children want the same foods over and over again. This is normal and may last for a few weeks or months. Be patient.

Children may need to see, smell and touch a food many times before tasting it. They may taste a food many times before they eat it. Continue to offer new foods and include foods your child has refused in the past.

Offer the same food in different ways

For example, vegetables can be served raw (chopped or grated), roasted, cooked in soups and pasta sauces, or blended in a smoothie. If your child likes vegetables prepared a certain way, give them other vegetables made that same way.

Let your child feed themselves

Letting your child self-feed is a big part of learning how to eat. They learn by touching, smelling, tasting and looking at foods. Learning to use a spoon and fork takes time. Making a mess is also part of learning how to eat.

Reduce distractions at mealtimes

Turn off the TV, cell phones, tablets and computers. This will help you focus on enjoying time together. It will also help your child listen to their body to know when they are full.

Be aware of pressure

Avoid any kind of pressure on your child to eat. Negative pressure can include punishing, shaming, coaxing or begging. Positive pressure can include encouraging, bribing, cheerleading or praising. This can make your child feel self-conscious and may trigger overeating or not

eating at all. All forms of pressure can prevent your child from developing a healthy relationship with food.

Involve your child in preparing food

Start teaching your child food skills from an early age. Children aged 2 to 3 years are able to count ingredients, add ingredients to a bowl and wash vegetables and fruits.

What if my child refuses to eat a meal?

Do not make a different meal if your child refuses to eat the one you offer. Making another meal will not teach them to be a healthy eater.

Plan your meals to include at least one food that your child likes to eat. Sometimes this may be the only food your child chooses to eat at a meal and that's okay. If your child doesn't want to eat at all, wait until the next meal or snack to feed them again.

For more information

If you have questions about your child's food intake or growth, call **8-1-1** to speak with a registered dietitian

- [HealthLinkBC File #69e Meal and snack ideas for your 1 to 3 year old child](#)
- [Benefits of eating together for children and families](#)
- [Health Canada involve kids in planning and preparing meals](#)