

# You, Your Child and Food

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers of Children Aged 2-5 years

## Help your child learn to eat well

Foods and beverages provide your child with the energy and nutrients they need to grow and play. At this age, young children are continuing to explore and learn about food and eating. This is a skill they develop over time. As a parent or caregiver, you can support your child to enjoy eating a variety of foods.

Meal and snack times provide opportunities to connect as a family; however, they can also present challenges. What parents and caregivers sometimes see as mealtime struggles are usually normal behaviours for children who are learning about food and eating. Children sometimes:

- eat more on some days and less on others;
- refuse to eat new foods or change their minds about foods they ate before;
- refuse a meal or snack;
- want to eat the same foods over and over again;
- are cautious with new foods.

## Tips for feeding your child

### Trust your child's appetite

The amount of food your child eats at each meal or snack may change from day to day depending on their appetite, activity level, whether they are having a growth spurt, or if they are excited, stressed or tired. Let your child decide if they want to eat the foods you offer, and how much. Children know best how much food they need.

Even with the best intentions, sometimes we do not trust our child's appetite and we put pressure on them to eat. Pressuring your child to eat certain foods or specific amounts of food does not help them learn to enjoy eating and may make them avoid some foods. Even things that seem encouraging or playful can be forms of pressure. Examples include:

“You can’t get up from the table until you eat your carrots.”

“If you don’t eat your meat, we won’t go to the park.”

“Eat your orange because it’s good for you.”

“Have one more bite.”

“If you eat another bite of broccoli, you can have an extra bedtime story.”

“Here comes the airplane” when bringing a spoonful of food to their mouth.

## Remember Your Roles

You and your child have a special relationship when it comes to feeding and eating. In this relationship, you and your child each have a role. You can help your children learn to eat by following your role with feeding and trusting your child will do theirs with eating. Having a healthy feeding relationship helps children to develop skills and positive attitudes about food.

You decide	
<b>What</b> foods and drinks to offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Offer a variety of foods from Canada's Food Guide.</li><li>Prepare one meal for the family.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Making one meal for the family will help your child learn to eat the same foods you enjoy.</li></ul></li></ul>
<b>When</b> foods and drinks are offered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Offer 3 meals and 2 to 3 snacks each day at regular times.</li><li>Offer only water between meals and snacks.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Offering other foods or drinks could spoil your child's appetite for their regular meals and snacks.</li></ul></li></ul>
<b>Where</b> and <b>how</b> foods and drinks are offered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Eat meals together as a family.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Sit with your child when eating.</li><li>Meals and snacks are great times to talk and ask about their day.</li></ul></li><li>Let your child see you enjoying foods.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Children who see family members eating a variety of foods, tend to try these foods.</li></ul></li><li>Help your child focus on eating by removing distractions during mealtimes.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Try not to bring phones to the table.</li><li>Turn off the television, tablets and computers and remove toys during meals.</li></ul></li><li>Make mealtimes pleasant and relaxed.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Your child will be more likely to eat if they are enjoying mealtime.</li><li>Children are more likely to have a happy mealtime if you don't pressure them to eat.</li></ul></li><li>Start by offering small amounts of foods at meals and snacks.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Offer more if your child wants more.</li><li>If your child eats little or nothing at one meal or snack, keep in mind that they will soon have another opportunity to eat at the next regular meal or snack.</li></ul></li><li>Changes in appetite are normal.</li></ul>

Your child decides	
<b>Whether</b> to eat the meal or snack offered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Let your child decide if they want to eat any of the foods offered, without pressure even just to taste a food.</li> </ul>
<b>Which</b> foods and drinks to eat from those you offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Let your child decide which foods they want to eat from the foods offered.</li> <li>Let your child eat foods in any order they choose.</li> </ul>
<b>How much</b> to eat and drink	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Let your child decide how much to eat from the foods offered.</li> <li>Trust and respect your child when they say they are full or still hungry. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If they don't want to eat a food or finish it, that's okay.</li> <li>At regular meals and snacks, if they finish their food and want more, give them more.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Adapted from Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility, available at: [www.ellynsatterinstitute.org](http://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org)

### Help your child learn to enjoy new foods

Your child needs opportunities to learn to try new foods. They may need to be offered a food 20 times or more before they learn to enjoy it.

- Offer new foods many times, prepared in different ways.
- Be patient and let your child explore new foods. Children often need to see, smell and touch a food many times before they will taste it.
- Don't pressure your child to try the new food; let them decide whether to eat it or not.

Prepare foods that you enjoy and give your child the opportunity to learn to like these foods.

- When offering a new food, start with a small amount and let your child decide if they want to try it.
- As part of the meal try to include one or two foods that your child generally eats, such as milk, bread and fruit, along with the new food.
- As often as possible, try to get your child involved in preparing food. They are more likely to try something new if they have been involved in making it.

Support your child to enjoy new foods in child care.

- Rather than sending in meals and snacks you know they like, have your child try the meals and snacks provided. This helps children build their confidence in eating and they are more likely to try new foods when they are with their friends.
- Children may not like everything being offered right away and that's okay. Child care providers are encouraged not to offer something different if a child doesn't want what is on the menu. There is usually something offered that they will eat (e.g., bread, fruit), and there is always another opportunity for a meal or snack coming soon.

- If you need to send food from home, try to include vegetables and fruits as well as whole grains and protein foods. For ideas on packing healthy lunches, visit [www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/lunches](http://www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/lunches). Children under four years of age can be at increased risk of choking. For more information visit: [www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/baby/building-healthy-eating-habits/food-choking-hazards](http://www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/baby/building-healthy-eating-habits/food-choking-hazards).

## Types of foods to offer children

Use Canada's Food Guide, [food-guide.canada.ca/en](http://food-guide.canada.ca/en), to help you decide what foods and beverages to offer your child.

## Meals and snacks

For well-balanced meals, include vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods and protein foods. Canada's Food Guide suggests that half of the meal is made up of vegetables and fruits so aim for:

- at least two vegetables and/or fruits at lunch and supper;
- at least one vegetable and/or fruit at breakfast; and,
- a vegetable or fruit, along with a protein food and/or a whole grain food at snacks.

## Vegetables and fruits

- Fresh, frozen and canned are all good choices.
- Choose a variety of colours, flavours and textures, to help your child learn over time to accept and enjoy many different vegetables and fruits.
- Try to include a dark green vegetable each day and an orange vegetable at least a few times a week.

## Whole grain foods

- Offer whole grain breads, tortillas, pasta, cereals, crackers etc. in meals and snacks.
- Look for the words "100% whole grain" on the front of the label or "whole grain" in the ingredients list.

## Protein foods

- Include a variety of food sources of iron every day such as meats, poultry, fish, shellfish, eggs, legumes, tofu, peanut butter and other nut/seed butters.
- Offer plant-based protein foods more often such as split peas, beans, chickpeas, lentils, hummus and tofu. These foods can be more affordable and work well when making baked beans, chili, pasta dishes, casseroles, salads and soups.

## Other considerations

### Food sources of calcium

- Offer food sources of calcium like milk, yogurt, cheese or tofu with added calcium at all meals and snacks, as recommended in Canada's Food Guide.
- These foods and drinks provide calcium and vitamin D, which are important for a child's bone development.
- Fortified soy beverage can be offered to children over 2 years of age as an alternative to milk.

## Water

- Drinking water is a great way for your child to quench their thirst and stay hydrated.
- When children are on the go or going to child care, you can provide water in a reusable bottle.
- Milk and fortified unsweetened plant-based beverages can also help your child stay hydrated.

## Highly processed foods and drinks

- Examples of highly processed foods include processed meats, French fries, sweets, ice cream, candy, chips and cheesies, which can be high in sodium (salt), sugars and/or saturated fat.
- If you offer these foods, do so less often and offer in small amounts.
- Drinks that contain added sugars or artificial sweeteners/sugar substitutes, should not be offered to children, including soft drinks, 100% fruit juice (even without added sugars, unsweetened juice has enough natural sugar for Canada's Food Guide to call it a "sugary drink"), fruit-flavoured drinks and punches, sports drinks etc.

To help you make decisions around foods and drinks you are purchasing, you can use the information found on the labels of food packages.

For more information on using the Nutrition Facts Table and the ingredient list, visit:

[www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/lunches/welcome-to-lunches/label-reading](http://www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/lunches/welcome-to-lunches/label-reading).

## Additional Resources

- Healthy Eating for Babies Age 6-12 Months: [www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/baby](http://www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/baby)
- Healthy Eating for Toddlers Age 12 to 24 Months: [www.gov.nl.ca/hcs/files/publications-pdf-healthyliving-toddler-guide-eating.pdf](http://www.gov.nl.ca/hcs/files/publications-pdf-healthyliving-toddler-guide-eating.pdf)
- Affordable Healthy Eating: [www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/affordable](http://www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/affordable)
- Vegetables and Fruits: [www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/veggiesandfruit](http://www.gov.nl.ca/healthyeating/veggiesandfruit)
- Safe Food Handling for Children Ages 5 and Under: [www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-safety-vulnerable-populations/food-safety-vulnerable-populations.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-safety-vulnerable-populations/food-safety-vulnerable-populations.html)
- Ellyn Satter Institute: [www.ellynsatterinstitute.org](http://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org)

If you have questions about nutrition, you can contact **Dial-a-Dietitian**. This is a free service that connects you with a Registered Dietitian in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Call 811 or visit: [www.811healthline.ca/healthy-eating](http://www.811healthline.ca/healthy-eating).