

Eating

Understanding and guiding how your child eats

You & Your Child

Many parents have strong beliefs about how children should eat. These beliefs usually come from the way they were raised. Some parents are very particular about not wasting food, or using utensils and not being messy.

Many times parents insist that their children follow the same rules.

But you need to be careful. Some parents expect their children to eat like adults. That can lead to trouble because children are children.

Infants and children explore with their hands. Why shouldn't they want to eat with them? Most children have a hard time eating with a fork and spoon. Why would you think they would be eager to do so? Young children are not always careful where they move their arms. Why would you expect your child to never knock over a glass of milk at the dinner table?

Mealtime can become tense and frustrating for parents who expect too much from their young children. It should be just the opposite.

On Back

What you can do to guide your child's eating habits.

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Have a before-dinner hand washing routine

Washing hands thoroughly helps to prevent illness. Children should always wash their hands before meals, especially young children who like to eat or touch their food with their fingers.

You'll have to do the job when your children are very young. Later, have them wash on their own. Try to make the routine fun.

Don't expect too much at first

One-year-olds will want to feed themselves. But they'll do it with their fingers. By about 15 months, children will try to use a spoon. But often they'll turn the spoon over before it gets to their mouth. By age 2 years, they'll be trying to use both a spoon and fork and they will get better at it as they get older. But even 6-year-olds sometimes have trouble eating properly with utensils.

Use special cups and utensils

Child cups with caps and spouts, sometimes called sipper cups, can be helpful. With these cups, children can get as much liquid as they need and any spill amounts to just a few drops.

Special child spoons and forks can also be handy. The handles of these utensils are shorter and some are shaped to help children pick up food and get it into their mouth.

Let your child mix foods together

Children like to make "soup" by stirring their food together. As long as your child eats, mixing foods together is fine. You might want to put a stop to it if your child won't eat after mixing the foods, or if it becomes only play.

Call spilled milk an "accident"

Young children will spill drinks often. Even children ages 6 to 8 years spill their drinks more often than you would expect.

Usually, a spill is an accident. While it may sometimes be the result of carelessness, it is usually not something your child does deliberately.

Have your child help you clean up the spill.

Have certain rules and enforce them calmly, but firmly

When your child is old enough to know not to do things such as play with food, throw food, or spit milk back into a cup, you should insist that such behavior is not allowed.

Tell your child the rules and warn that he or she will have to be removed from the table to eat alone if it happens again.

If the child repeats the behavior, say, "I am sorry. I told you not to do that. Other people don't want to see that."

Then, take the child from the table to another area of the room or some other separate place. There, the child should either finish his or her meal or sit alone for a while before returning to the table.

Relax and try to have a pleasant mealtime

It is important to be relaxed during mealtime. Eating should be fun and pleasurable. It should not be tense and filled with rules and enforcement.

You can help by cutting your child's food into small, bite-sized pieces. This will be safer and usually less messy.

Don't insist on adult manners for young children.

