



Setting realistic expectations about toddlers' eating habits

Mealtimes with infants may have felt fun, exciting, or even easy compared to what you are facing with your now toddler. As an infant, they were interested and willing to try most anything you offered or placed in front of them. They gave a sweet smile or hand gestures to indicate liking the new taste or texture and wanting more. They may have even had a funny face and shake of the head to say no thank you or all done.

Flash forward a year and now it seems like your infant turned toddler will barely eat anything. They also have a lot more to say about what is being served and whether they want to eat it. What feels like a small battle at each meal or snack can be exhausting. It may also leave you worried or wondering whether they are eating enough.

Let's review some developmental milestones of the toddler years and set you at ease that many of your frustrating experiences are completely normal and just a phase.

Growth slows and appetite changes. Children grow at a rapid pace during their first year of life. But after that it slows down. When growth slows, so does appetite. It is normal for toddlers to seem like they are eating less. Some days or meals they may eat a lot and others they won't. Continue offering regular meals and snacks throughout the day and they will get what their body needs to grow, learn, and play.

Only wants to eat one or a few foods. At this age, children begin to develop likes and dislikes. They are also able to communicate more clearly with words and actions. The combination of being able to express their opinions and to have others respond also affects dynamics around food. They may suddenly refuse to eat what you once thought was their favorite food. Continue to offer a variety of healthy foods at each meal and snack. Kids cannot learn to like new or different tastes if they don't have a chance to try it. Serving favorite or safe foods with new or different ones can make trying new things less scary. Ketchup and broccoli anyone?

Keep snacks and meals short and sweet. Toddlers have short attention spans and can easily be distracted. Pair this with a decreased appetite and you are bound to have a kid get up from the table or start playing with food. When your little one starts to get distracted, check how their belly feels. Then let them get up and move on. You can remind them this is it until the next meal or snack. You can also wrap up leftovers in case they come back for more later.

Messes will be made. Toddlers are still mastering the fine and gross motor skills required to feed themselves. They can eat with a spoon and drink from an open cup. But they may miss their mouth. You can help them by providing child-sized plates, cups, and utensils. If you are worried about messes on clothes, then continue to use bibs or large napkins.

Practice makes better, and the same goes with feeding a toddler. Have some grace for yourself and your toddler as you learn and practice these new skills together. Before you know it, there will be fewer messes and demands. Hang in there and celebrate the baby steps of progress along the way.

Reference

United States Department of Agriculture.

(n.d.). *Toddlers*. MyPlate. <https://www.myplate.gov/life-stages/toddlers>

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