



## If Your Toddler or Preschooler Doesn't Eat Enough



Bethany's parents were convinced that she'd starve if they didn't take charge. They were so worried about her eating that at mealtimes her father held her head and tried to force food between her lips. She fought back and screamed so loudly that her parents worried that the neighbors would think they were abusing her. Perhaps they were, but it was understandable why they were doing it.

From the beginning, Bethany was tiny and her parents tried to get her to eat more than she wanted. Even when she was a baby, she resisted eating and feedings were unpleasant. As she got older, the struggles got worse and worse. When she was 15 months old, Bethany's parents were advised to back off on the forcing, and the situation improved. At first, she didn't eat very much. But after a few days, she got more interested in eating and even experimented a little with food she hadn't eaten before. She still ate very little at times, but at other times she ate more. She began to eat like other toddlers and her growth stopped falling off the charts. She was still tiny, but that seemed to be normal for her. Children are flexible. If parents change the way they do things, children change, too.

**Maintain a division of responsibility in feeding**  
 Bethany's parents were crossing the lines of division of responsibility. They were failing to maintain the structure of meals and snacks. At mealtime they were trying to do her job of determining what and how much she ate. At the same time, they let her do *their* job of menu planning by serving only food that she seemed to like. Between times, they let her graze for food and were grateful when she ate. Like a lot of other parents, their negative approach to feeding grew out of concern and even desperation for the welfare of their child. However, such forcing, pushing, controlling and catering tactics backfire.

When you get pushy with food, your child will eat less, not more. For a child—or for anyone else—being forced to eat is extremely unpleasant. Even more important, it's the principle involved. A toddler cares deeply about being her own person, about being able to say yes or no. Parents have to set limits, but they also have to allow their child to be independent within those

limits. Those issues of autonomy and control must be sorted out when a child is a toddler or they continue right on into the preschool years and beyond.

The family table has to be a nice place, or nobody—not even parents—will want to be there. Families meals will be pleasant if you observe a division of responsibility in feeding. Maintain the structure of meals and snacks, and let your child decide what and how much to eat at times *you* choose. Don't let her panhandle for food between times, and don't let her drink all the juice she wants. You might be happy to have her eating *something*, but food handouts don't help in the long run. Studies show children who are allowed foods or caloric beverages whenever they ask for them eat half as much as those who are given structured meals and snacks. Here are some other issues to keep in mind as you work on having pleasant meals:

- Be at meals yourself and *eat with* your child; don't just *feed* her.
- Keep it pleasant and light; don't use mealtimes for scolding.
- Pay attention to your child, talk and answer, but don't make her the center of attention.
- Don't try to force, persuade, reward or cheer-lead her to get her to eat. Children see through even "nice" pressure and eat less well, not better.

For more information about appropriate approaches to feeding, see [HOW TO FEED YOUR TODDLER].

### What is the problem?

Why do you think your toddler doesn't eat enough? Does she eat less than other toddlers? Is she smaller than other children her age? If the issue is her not eating much or being small, it is probably normal for her *provided she is growing consistently*. That, of course, can only be evaluated if she is weighed and measured many times over many months and her measurements plotted on standard growth curves. Even if she grows consistently, however, there might still be a *problem*, if you worry about her small size. Unless you are very careful to avoid it, your worry about your child's eating or growth can make you pushy with feeding and you will create the very problem you

fear: poor growth.

Children eat in strange and wonderful ways. You can only know if your child eats *enough for her* by assessing her growth. Consistent growth means she is doing well. Even shifting across growth percentile curves can be normal, if the shift is gradual over several months or years. However, *rapid* veering across growth percentile curves is a cause for concern and indicates that something is amiss. To evaluate what that something might be, see [IF YOUR TODDLER OR PRESCHOOLER GROWS POORLY].

### Why children eat or grow poorly

If you are worried for whatever reason about your child's eating and growth, be sure to ask for an appointment with a dietitian or other health professional who understands feeding dynamics, growth, and food selection for children.

- Your child might have a low-grade illness that spoils her appetite. When she recovers, she will eat more than usual for a time.
- She could have a medical condition that needs to be attended to. At times a child's poor food acceptance grows out of her difficulty developing the ability to chew and swallow.
- Food selection could be a problem. Your food might be too drab or too low in fat.
- Feeding may not be appropriate for her stage in development. Your child may be stuck on the breast or bottle or be having trouble making the transition to table food. You might still be feeding your toddler or preschooler on demand, like you did when she was a baby.
- You may have trouble maintaining a division of responsibility. Like Bethany's parents, you might be getting pushy with feeding. Also like Bethany's parents, you may not maintain the structure of meals and snacks.

If your child checks out medically, and if food selection and feeding are appropriate, you can relax and trust that your child's growth is appropriate.

### Choose the right food

At mealtime, offer a variety of foods—a main dish, milk, fruit or vegetable, bread, a second starchy food, butter or margarine—and let your child choose from what's available [see MEALS FOR CHILDREN].

Have food be tasty and attractive, but don't knock yourself out making special food. Have foods that are reasonably easy for your child to chew and swallow. Make sure you are not trying to cook too low in fat. You don't have to push fat, but have enough fat in food so it is good-tasting and easy to eat. For more information about using fat appropriately to make food appealing and rewarding to eat, see [FAT IN YOUR CHILD'S DIET]. If food is tasty and the feeding

relationship is appropriate, your child will eat. You don't have to push fatty foods or offer special formulas that are high in calories. Too often, promoting these special foods takes the place of teaching the child to eat. In the long run, that too will backfire.

### Four tips to help your child eat better

Give child-sized helpings, or better still, let your child serve herself. If you put too much food on her plate, she may not even try to eat. A child-sized helping is about  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  the adult helping size, or one tablespoon per year of age [see HOW MUCH SHOULD YOUR TODDLER (or PRESCHOOLER) EAT?].

Don't make your child clean up her plate, even if she served herself. The same as you, at times her eyes may be bigger than her stomach. Avoid rules like, "One bite of everything," "if you take it you have to eat it," "no more spaghetti until you eat your vegetables."

Watch the juice. Limit your child's juice to 3 to 6 ounces a day. Give juice along with breakfast or snacks, not between times. Give water between times for thirst.

When your child loses interest in food, wants to get down from the table or starts to behave badly, let her get down. Don't offer substitutes, and don't let her come back until the next regular feeding. Letting her stay at the table after she loses interest in eating will make her eat less.

### Your eating attitudes and behaviors

You have to feed yourself well to feed your child well. No matter how hard you try to avoid it, your child will eat the way you eat. If you have negative feelings about eating, have difficulty preparing appealing family meals, depend solely on others' enjoyment in order to justify your food-preparation efforts or have a very short list of foods that you enjoy, you aren't showing your child what positive eating is all about. Moreover, you will have serious difficulty trusting your child to do her part with eating. For more information about you and your eating, see [BEING A ROLE MODEL FOR YOUR CHILD'S EATING]. If all goes well, you will be able develop more positive eating attitudes and behaviors on your own. You might, however, be stuck. If so, get help from a dietitian or other professional who understands eating attitudes and behaviors. The time and effort you put in now will pay big dividends later on.

For more about parenting your toddler or preschooler with feeding, see Ellyn Satter's *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, Bull Publishing, 2000.

For more about helping yourself with your own eating as well as planning and cooking meals that are easy, tasty, attractive and appropriate for the big and little eaters at the table, see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, Kelcy Press, 1999.