

STRATEGIES FOR MEALTIME SUCCESS

In child care settings

During early years, children are developing their autonomy and relationship with food. It is normal for them to:

- strive for independence (refusing to eat, wanting to eat the same 1 or 2 foods),
- want to feed themselves,
- have a varying appetite (and occasionally skip meals),
- be afraid of trying new foods,
- need 10 or more exposures to a new food (seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting) before they accept it.

Building trust with children and creating positive mealtime experiences free of shame and pressure helps them feel safe and respected during meal and snack times.



Leading positive mealtime experiences

When children refuse to eat or finish their food, educators may worry that children are not getting the nutrition they need for growth and development. They may pressure the child to eat. In most cases, *pressure does not change the amount of food a child eats.*¹ In fact, pressuring children to eat can impact their relationship with food and make them lose touch with their hunger and fullness cues.

Children should eat because they are hungry, not to please an adult.

¹ Lumeng, J. C., Miller, A. L., Appugliese, D., Rosenblum, K., & Kaciroti, N. *Picky eating, pressuring feeding, and growth in toddlers.* (2018). *Appetite*, 123, 299-305. Cited February 7, 2024 from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.12.020>.

PRAISING

After a child tries a new food, you say: *“Good girl for trying the peas.”*

Praising children for eating may lead to them eating in order to please adults.

PERSUADING OR REMINDING

“You’ve tried it before.”
“Don’t forget to eat your meat.”

Persuading or reminding children to eat specific foods may make those foods less appealing.

COMFORTING WITH FOOD

“I know what will make that boo boo go away - have a little snack.”

Providing food when a child is hurt or upset teaches him to eat to feel better.

SCOLDING OR SHAMING

“You are wasting food.”
“Finish your food like your friends.”

This teaches children to ignore their hunger and fullness cues and eat to avoid guilt.

TYPES OF PRESSURE²

PUNISHING

“Since you didn’t eat that, we can’t go outside and play.”

Children may eat to avoid punishment, instead of listening to their hunger and fullness cues.

TALKING ABOUT FOOD BEING HEALTHY

“These will make you grow big and strong.”

Abstract ideas, like health benefits, can be difficult for children to understand. This may lead to children thinking that certain foods are “good” or “bad”.

BRIBING OR REWARDING

“If you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert.”

This gives dessert a “special status” making it more appealing than vegetables. A child may eat to get a desired outcome, instead of paying attention to their hunger and fullness cues.

THE ONE-BITE RULE

“You don’t have to like it, but you do have to take a bite of every food.”

Respect the roles in feeding: children decide **what** foods to eat, and how much.

² Ellyn Satter Institute. *Positive or Negative, it’s Still Pressure*. (2019). Cited February 20, 2024 from: <https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/positive-or-negative-its-still-pressure/>

Navigating Common Mealtime Situations

Age appropriate expectations help navigate mealtime situations. Children typically outgrow common issues, such as fear of new foods and wanting only 1-2 specific foods. Avoid labeling the child as a picky eater and assuming their preferences by categorizing foods as ones they 'like' or 'don't like'. As a reminder³:

Educator decide	Children decide
What foods are offered, and when and where children will eat	What foods to eat, and whether and how much to eat



³ Ellyn's Satter's Institute. Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility in Feeding. (2015). Cited January 31, 2024 from: <https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ELLYN-SATTER%E2%80%99S-DIVISION-OF-RESPONSIBILITY-IN-FEEDING.pdf>

The chart below offers strategies to help address mealtime situations.

WHAT YOU CAN SAY	WHAT YOU CAN DO
A child refuses meal or snack OR only wants only 1 or 2 foods	
<p><i>“That’s okay, you don’t have to eat it. Just sit with us for a while.”</i></p> <p><i>“You can eat some of the other foods on the table if you don’t feel like trying this one.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on the meal and time spent together (not how much is eaten).• Give children time to explore how food feels, smells and tastes.• Offer new foods many times, prepared in different ways.• Present new foods with familiar foods.
A child tries a new food	
<p><i>“I see you tried it, what do you notice about how it tastes?”</i></p> <p>You could also choose to say nothing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow children to form their own opinions about the food they eat.• Encourage children to explore how food tastes, feels and looks.• Take the pressure off. Enjoy your own meal with children.
A child eats more/less than they usually do	
<p><i>“Is your stomach telling you it’s full?”</i></p> <p>You could also choose to say nothing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trust that children know how much they need to eat.• Remain neutral and continue eating with children.• Have pleasant conversation during meals and snacks. Avoid commenting about how much children eat.

A child is not done eating by the end of mealtime

“There are 5 minutes left (and then it is nap time), let me know if you need any help.”

- 20-30 minutes is typically enough time to eat for most children.
- Children may no longer be hungry. Remove food without comment.
- Limit distractions (TV, screens, toys) and enjoy mealtime together.

A child is upset during mealtime

“You’re crying. I think you might not be feeling good inside. Tell me about it.”

- Validate children’s feelings.
- Comfort children with words and attention (not food) to support self-regulation.

This information is for general use by child care educators. However, if you have concerns about a child's eating behaviour, further support may be needed. Discuss your concerns with the child’s parents or caregiver.

For more information on child nutrition, visit unlockfood.ca or [Canada’s Food Guide](https://www.canada.ca/food-guide). Call [Health811](https://health811.ca) to speak to a Registered Dietitian at no cost. Your local [public health unit](#) may also be able to offer support.