

## Stop Mealtime Power Struggles

**Feeding toddlers can be frustrating. A pleasant mealtime can turn into a battle of wills. This is a battle that parents cannot win. Mealtime power struggles happen when parents try to force their toddler to eat.**

Parents can avoid power struggles at the table if they understand normal toddler behavior. Most toddlers are picky eaters. They have likes and dislikes. A toddler may refuse to eat a food because of its color or the feel in her mouth. Typically, toddlers eat a particular food for awhile and then all of a sudden refuse it. These *food jags* frustrate parents.

Toddlers are learning to exert control over their lives. Eating is one of the first activities that a toddler can control. A parent's

role is to prepare healthy food for their toddler. The toddler's role will be to decide if he will eat what is prepared.

Unlike babies, toddlers are no longer in a period of rapid growth. As a result, they are less hungry. Their small stomachs get full quickly. So, they may require several snacks in addition to their regular meals.

Toddlers have erratic eating patterns. They may eat great one day and hardly eat anything the next day. Remember, kids *will eat* when they are hungry.



Also, toddlers are easily frustrated and distracted. They cannot sit still for a very long time. Expect your child to lose patience at the table.

Enjoy your toddler. If you have eating concerns, discuss your child's eating pattern with his doctor.

- Make meals family time. Talk about fun topics. Have a "no-TV" rule.
- Feed your toddler the same foods you feed your family. It might be helpful to prepare a main dish that everyone likes.
- *Never force your toddler to eat.* Punishment and threats can make him dislike mealtime.
- Respect your toddler's likes and dislikes. Do not pressure or bribe him to eat all foods.
- Let your toddler eat another healthy food if she refuses the main meal. Make it something simple like a sandwich or cereal. *Do not become a short order cook who makes different foods for each family member.*
- Cut your toddler's food into bite size pieces. Offer finger food. Buy child sized spoons and forks.
- Encourage your toddler to try new foods. Some toddlers may need to see a food at least 10 times before they try it.
- Get rid of the clean-your-plate rule. Do not force your toddler to eat after she tells you she is full.
- Expect a mess when your toddler eats. He has poor motor control. He will learn table manners as he gets older.
- Offer child sized portions – about  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{3}$  of an adult portion. Give your child less than you think she will eat. Let her ask for more.
- Offer 3 regular meals plus 2 to 3 snacks everyday. Make snack time at least 2 hours before a meal. Do not allow all day snacking.
- Make desserts a part of the meal. Do not use them for rewards. Desserts can be

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