



## Family Meals with Growing Children

From preschool through teen years, family mealtimes are a good time to keep in touch with growing children.

### Children's Stages

Children go through stages and so does eating behavior. Knowing the stages helps parents guide their child and have positive family meals.

#### Toddlers

- Are messy eaters just learning to use forks and spoons. Parents need to be ready to wipe up spills.
- Do best with finger foods.
- Eat only 1-2 tablespoons of food at a time. Appetites go up and down during the day. Parents do not need to worry.
- Say "no" to new foods. When parents ignore the "no" and just eat and enjoy the food, the toddler will begin to eat and enjoy it too.
- Need a quiet time before meals to calm down.
- Learn new words from mealtime conversations.

#### Preschoolers

- Are curious and ask "why".
- Like to help mix or stir food, make sandwiches, or clean fruits and vegetables.

- Like to eat foods they helped prepare.
- Eat best when surrounded by pleasant conversation.

#### 6 to 12 year olds

- Generally eat well.
- Are cooperative.
- Can carry on a conversation. Children are more talking about and accepting of new trying new foods.
- Want the foods they see advertised on TV if in the earlier years.
- Enjoy cooking and eating simple foods they make during the later years.

#### Teenagers

- Are learning how to be an adult and are trying different behaviors.
- Able to handle some responsibility for preparing meals, if there's time.
- Are prone to big swings in mood and eating jags.
- Eat foods eaten by friends.
- Need to have adults listen and talk with them.
- May complain about family mealtimes, but still need adult conversation and family meals.

## Take the Fight out of Family Meals—Dividing the Responsibilities

Developing pleasant mealtimes can be a struggle with fights about food and how much the child is eating. To reduce food fights, parents need to know that parents and children have different responsibilities. Parents want children to eat and be healthy. But forcing children to eat has the opposite effect. Power struggles around food can be reduced by “understanding who does what”. This is simple, and it works. It takes some practice.

# Decisions

### Parents decide:

- **What food is served**
- **When food is served**

Example:

### Parents decide what food is served:

- Serve a variety of foods from the Food Guide Pyramid
- Make sure there is something the children likes at each meal

### Parents decide when food is served:

- Schedule regular times for meals and snacks and expect children to come eat at that time. If a child does not eat at a meal and wants food afterwards, tell the child to wait until the next meal or snack time. But do not put children to bed, hungry.

### Children decide:

- **How much to eat**
- **Whether or not to eat.**

Example:

### Kids decide how much to eat:

- Serve small portions. Allow children to ask for second helpings. A toddler only eats one to two tablespoons of food at a time and will usually eat well at one meal and not at the next.
- Don't tell the child that he has or has not eaten enough. His body will tell him if he is hungry.

### Kids decide whether or not to eat

- Don't worry if a child doesn't eat well at a meal. If the child is not snacking, he'll eat if hungry.
- Even if a child does not eat, have the child sit at the table to show that mealtimes are important for the family.