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## **ARTICLES & ACTIVITIES**

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### **Eating with Toddlers and Preschoolers**

Caring for toddlers and preschoolers can be one of the most entertaining things you will ever do. It may also be one of the most challenging, especially if that caring includes feeding. Here are some tips you may find helpful:

#### **Have regular meals and snacks**

Young children tend to eat better when they understand and become familiar with a regular routine for their meals and snacks.

#### **Make meal times pleasant**

You can do this by being supportive of the child, but not forceful. Respect the toddler's own eating pace, bearing in mind that by our standards, the pace may be slow. Eating is still a time for learning: a time to touch and experience various foods. Give them plenty of time for this learning activity- as much as 20-30 minutes if necessary.

You can also pay attention to and speak with the children, but be careful not to overwhelm them. Most toddlers will feel more comfortable in a highchair where they are at your level at the table, and their feet can be supported instead of dangling!

#### **Resist Panhandling**

A common toddler mealtime behaviour is to refuse a meal and then come around looking for handouts soon afterwards. Sometimes they do this because they do not like the meal, but more likely they are just trying to exert a little control. This is a good time to teach them about limits. You could respond to their request by saying, 'Lunch is over. In one hour you can have a snack.' This is a positive message and allows the child to experience a little hunger, which is a natural consequence of refusing a meal, for a short time.

## Be realistic about amounts

Toddler portions are naturally smaller than adult sized portions. In fact, they can be as small as half a slice of bread, 1 or 2 tablespoons of vegetables or meat, and half a cup of milk. Offer small portions and let the child ask for more if they want more.

## Don't force a toddler to eat

If a toddler in your care refuses to eat, let them know that that is okay. Instead, ask them to sit at the table anyway to keep others company and to join in the conversation. Chances are the child will join in the meal, and if not, there is always snack time in an hour or two.

## Limit juice and milk

Too much milk or juice (of any kind) can fill up a toddler. This makes them feel less hungry for food. If you have a toddler in your care that is frequently eating poorly at mealtimes, try offering water between meals, instead of milk or juice. It may just help to improve the appetite.

## And finally, let them get a little messy!

Remember that toddlers are not expert eaters, and they will want to eat with their hands! If a new food is offered to a child, they will often play with it before tasting it.

## There is a limit to the mess though!

When toddlers are finished eating, they often start to throw food to the floor. It is their way of telling you they are finished! Often saying 'no' and taking them down from the high chair will teach the toddler that throwing food is not appropriate.

We do want them to learn to eat and to be pleasant at the table.

***This article was written by Stephanie Staus, RDN, Community Nutritionist, Fraser Health Authority, South Fraser Health Area (604) 542-4000.***