

How Do I Keep My Child Seated at Mealtime?

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

A child that does not sit during mealtime can create havoc for everyone. Instead of being a time for connection, nourishment and relaxation, mealtime becomes chaotic as your child hops on and off his chair, refuses to sit and wants to eat while running around. All you want is for your child to eat a healthy variety of foods and sit calmly during mealtime.

In addition to being annoying, eating while running around significantly increases choking risks. Death by choking is a leading cause of death in children age 2 and under. Eating and traveling is a behavior that should never be tolerated.

If it sounds too daunting of a task to keep your child seated during mealtime, read on. Mealtimes with everyone seated may not be as difficult as you might think. You first must be consistent and firm. Once your child knows what is expected and that you really mean it, you may be surprised that your once traveling eater may be calmly seated with the rest of the family until he is finished eating his meal.

The following are must-do guidelines to ensure success:

- Be firm and consistent. Make sure that you and any other caregiver agrees and consistently follows the plan. No exceptions.
- Make sure that your child is hungry. No food or snacks for at least 2 hours prior to meals.
- Eat at a reasonable time. Most children cannot wait until 7 pm to start the family meal.
- Provide a lot of food choices. Make sure that you provide 2 healthy foods that your child will eat along with one food that you would like your child to try.
- Establish a predictable mealtime routine. That will help your child remember that they are required to sit down during mealtime.
- Make sure that your child has an appropriate seat at an appropriate table.
- Toddlers are not yet developmentally ready for the kind of dinner you can have with older kids, keep mealtime reasonably short.
- Be a good model. The entire family must sit at the table during mealtime.
- Eat your meal without distractions. No TV, DVD players or cell phones during mealtime.
- Do not short order cook.
- Don't discount tummy issues or sensory issues expressed by your child. Seek help if you are concerned.
- Respect your child's communication that he is finished eating. Do not try to get in a "few more bites."

Other great ideas:

- Place your child in a toddler booster seat at the table, make a big deal about transitioning to "the big boy chair".
- Teach your child sign language (all done, more, milk, juice) to give your child more control and ability to communicate his wants and needs.
- Allow children to self-serve. They will feel more independent and will more likely eat what they took.
- Use a timer to visually help your child understand when it is time to get down.
- Light a candle and your child (age appropriate) can blow out the candle when the meal is finished.
- Don't make your child eat everything on his plate. When he is finished, he is finished.
- Use a reward system to reinforce good sitting. You can use verbal praise, stickers, stamps, privileges, etc. Never use food such as dessert or candies.
- Children have a natural desire to experience food in a tactile manner. Allow your toddler to respectfully play with their food, to squish it between their fingers and explore it while they are eating. Messy eating is a good thing.
- The active child may find a balance disk helpful to reduce the wiggles.
- A strong rubber band between the legs of the chair may help the child that loves to swing their legs or kick.

Children are naturally curious and energetic, which makes it difficult for them to sit down for any length of time. Keeping children seated during mealtime is a must for safety and to establish good eating manners. Hopefully you will discover that your reward for being consistent and firm about mealtime sitting will be peaceful family meals.