



**UW**  
**Extension**

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## Making Mealtimes Happy Time

*You are responsible for what is presented to eat, when it is presented, where it is presented. Children are responsible for, how much and even whether they eat.*

1. Provide a good example. You can't expect your child to fill up on broccoli and spinach while you munch on chips and dip in front of the television.
2. Involve your children in preparation. Even small children can help prepare some of the things they eat. If a child has helped make a meal or snack, he or she is more likely to eat it.
3. Talk with your child about basic nutrition. Talk about foods that help children grow strong and stay healthy...and those that don't. Classify foods at the market or on the table, into the food groups. Play simple games that teach about these foods.
4. Make wise choices at the supermarket and stock up on fresh fruits and vegetables instead of boxed cookies and chips.
5. Serve small helpings and cut everything into small bites to fit small mouths. It's not so overwhelming when there are small amounts on a plate. A child will ask for more if desired. Make everything look as appetizing as possible. Sometimes it's fun to make a face or a design with the bites of food.
6. Avoid offering sweets as a reward. This tells your child that desserts are more important and desirable than the other parts of the meal. Children get mixed messages when food is used as a reward or given for emotional comfort.

7. Offer at least one food you know your child likes at each meal. Allow your child to make some food choices on their own. Providing the choice between an orange and a banana offers the strong-willed child some options.
8. Make mealtime and snack time a social event in a pleasant atmosphere. A child is much more apt to try new things in a happy environment. Don't get angry...it only makes a child more stubborn about trying new foods. Maybe he or she simply isn't hungry, but will be a willing-eater at the next meal. Avoid pleading ("Please eat"), threatening ("No dessert if you don't eat your salad") or guilt-inducing ("Think of all the hungry children in the world"), they won't help.
9. Keep meals reasonably short but allow plenty of time for the child to finish eating. If a child dawdles, she's finished. Take the food away and don't allow a snack for another hour or two. This discourages your child from refusing food at the table in hopes she will get what she wants afterward.
10. Stay positive. Expect some setbacks. Most children go through phases where they reject foods because of texture or appearance. These phases seldom last. Expect food jags and avoid making issues out of likes and dislikes. Above all, don't bribe or force.
11. Offer at least one food you know your child likes at each meal. You may ask your child to try everything but don't force or battle him/her to eat everything.
12. Meals should never be power struggles between parent and child. If children learn that food demands are a good way to manipulate you, they will use eating time as an opportunity to get what they want. Learning to eat is your child's job. Keep introducing and offering healthy food.

Written by Karen Early, Nutrition Education Coordinator - Brown County.

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