



Eating Summary

Why Eating?

Your child's openness to try new foods and engage with others around the meal table are essential to developing lifelong healthy eating habits. You can begin by exposing your child to new foods that are just the right level of challenge for them, offer just enough support and patience for them to know they can trust you, and help them recognize and feel a sense of success and empowerment when they master the experience.

Tip These steps are best done when you and your child are not tired or in a rush.

Tip Intentional communication and actively building a healthy parent relationship will support these steps.

Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Help your child notice and name their own cues so they can develop self-awareness and learn to trust their own feelings. This includes describing and naming the pride they may feel when they have tried something new. Pointing out the healthy eating habits that they demonstrate will help them notice their successes and know they are capable when the next challenge arises.
- Each time there is an opportunity, ask your child, *"What do you notice? How do you feel?"*
 - For example, if your child is with others who don't like a food that your child likes - help your child notice their own thoughts and reactions, and those of the other children. You might even name what expressions and body language you notice: *"I see the other children are staring at the seaweed chips that you brought today. Some of them are plugging their noses. I wonder if this is a new food for them."*
 - You can also point out that you remember when your child had a similar reaction to a new food but now they like it. *"Do you remember when you tried salmon? You thought it smelled funny at first and now it is something we like a lot. Maybe your friends will get more comfortable too."*
 - When reading books, choose books that show families eating a wide range of foods and point out when they have healthy eating habits. *"I noticed she had a yummy apple for her snack. Mmmm."*

- If your child is feeling unsure about how to describe all of the feelings that occur when trying to develop healthy habits, consider asking questions, naming what you notice, and leaving plenty of quiet space after your questions so they have an opportunity to share their ideas too.
 - *“I noticed some children like this food. I noticed other children do not like it yet. How do you feel right now?”*
 - *“Let’s remember how brave it felt to try something new today!”*

Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Read and “pretend play” together. Use old food containers or pretend foods to play “restaurant” or “dinner time” with your child. Use a take out menu from a local restaurant that you like. Then you can practice saying the names of the foods, being interested in them, and planning to take a “bite” and being curious about how it will taste.
- Share your thoughts and feelings. Talk about what you notice, how you are feeling, why you are feeling it, and what signs you are giving even when it’s not comfortable. *“I really like fruits, but I know that I also need to eat veggies because they are healthy too.”*
- Talk aloud about the ways in which you respond to your own big feelings: *“That is my favorite new food, and I was so surprised that Uncle Kenny was not willing to try it. That made me sad.”*

Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- It is ok to eat certain foods more often than others. Provide many opportunities for your child to be exposed to new foods and share in eating routines with family members. Even if it means mixing a small amount of the new food into another food that they already like or covering the new food in a sauce or cheese. It will help them take one step closer to expanding their range of healthy foods. This will help them feel successful and develop an identity as someone who tries new foods.
- Provide books, dolls, menus, food magazine cut-outs, and pretend food at home to give your child many chances to see new foods and new ways of eating.
- Use your child’s dolls or stuffed animals to act out moments of new habit building. This is a good way to practice facing really big challenges. You could say, *“Let’s cook new food for your doll. Would your doll like some trout? How does your doll feel about trying it? Maybe your doll can try just a little bit.”*

Step 4. **Support** Your Child’s Development and Success

- Recognize effort by using “I notice…” statements like: *“I noticed that you put a little bit of the peppers on your plate and tried a few bites. I love seeing that.”*
- On days with extra challenges when you can see your child is scared of new people or situations, offer confidence in your child’s ability to face the new. In a gentle, non-public way, you can say, *“Remember how last time it seemed like the new food would be bad but you tried it, and it turned out to be yummy? I thought you might like this food too.”*
- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when approaching challenges. You can offer reflections like:

- *“You looked like you did not like the fish. Would you like to practice what you can do if that happens again?”* Offering comfort when facing new situations can help your child gain a sense of security to face them rather than backing away.
- You can also offer comfort items to help your child face new challenges. *“We are having a lot of guests come to our house for dinner tonight. Would you like to bring your bear to the dinner table to help you feel more comfortable?”* Bring a comfort item with you as you face new challenges.

Step 5. **Recognize Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation**

- Recognize and call out when it is going well. If your child was unwilling to try the vegetables last night but tried them today, notice the change. *“I notice you tried a bite of vegetables tonight. You did not want to do that last night, but you were brave tonight to try them!”*
- Recognize small steps along the way. *“I noticed you tried a little bite of each new food on your plate.”*
- Notice when your child tries something new or recovers smoothly from a challenging situation. These conversations might start happening naturally during your bedtime routine or when snuggling up to read stories together.
- Build celebrations into your everyday routine. Promote joy and happiness by laughing, singing, dancing, hugging, and snuggling to appreciate one another.

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