



# PPOD™

## Parents & Pediatricians Optimizing Development

### **PPOD Tip of the Month: HEALTHY EATING**

Serving your child a variety of healthy foods provides the nutrients needed to build a strong body. It also supplies your child with the energy needed to grow normally, play, learn, and stay healthy. Offering your child a variety of nutritious foods is the best way to supply the nutrients and calories needed. As long as your child is growing normally both physically and developmentally, have structured meal and snack times, do not have certain medical conditions, and is not on a special diet, your child will regulate eating to meet his energy and growth needs. If your child is underweight, overweight, or obese, talk with your doctor or a registered dietitian for a special diet to meet your child's needs.

Each day, you should try to eat at least one meal as a family. Researchers have found that eating meals together as a family, in a structured and positive environment, is associated with a variety of wonderful outcomes for children and the more a family eats together, the better.

#### Benefits of Eating Meals Together as a Family

- Eating family dinners together is associated with the development of healthy eating habits.
- The quality of mealtime conversation is a strong predictor of children's language and literacy development.
- Mealtime conversation promotes self-esteem in children.
- Children who frequently eat meals with their families tend to do better in school, including getting better grades and scoring higher on achievement tests.
- Children who eat with their parents are less likely to end up with a drug, cigarette, or alcohol habit; get depressed; develop eating disorders; or consider suicide; and are more likely to delay having sex.

### **HELPFUL HINTS**

Allow your child to be as independent as possible at mealtime. Your child may make a mess, but to develop independent eating skills, your child needs to practice. While learning to use a spoon, offer a finger food at each meal. This will give your child a chance to use his fingers to feed himself part of the meal. This will increase feelings of independence and decrease those of frustration. In addition, give your child a spoon to practice using at each meal. If needed, you can help feed your child with another spoon or fork.

Between two and four years of age, growth slows. Children gain an average of five to six pounds and grow about two inches each year during this time. As a result of slower growth, you may notice a decrease in appetite. The decrease in appetite may seem contradictory because activity level increases. Playing and running, however, requires fewer calories than growing.

If your child's appetite is very small, offer only the highest quality foods and watch your child's liquid intake. If your child drinks too much apple juice or milk, there may not be enough room in his stomach for the food. When you offer your child food, give him half the amount you think he can eat. When he eats all his food, praise him for eating and offer him some more.

You probably plan family meals to provide your child with a healthy, well-balanced, and tasty diet. You may, however, find that your child's appetite varies from day to day and meal to meal. Trust your child's judgment about quantity—don't force him to eat food he doesn't want after he indicates that he is finished. Remember that your own appetite varies, depending on your activity level and your desire for the food offered. *Your child should determine whether or not to eat and if so, how much to eat. You should determine what foods to offer, when your child eats, and where your child eats.* If you offer your child food all day long, even in small amounts, he doesn't have the chance to get hungry and may find meals uninteresting.

Feed your child six times a day: breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, mid-afternoon snack, dinner, and bedtime snack. To assure the best appetite possible, don't offer food or caloric beverages between these times. You can, however, offer a glass of water to drink. If your child is consistently hungry before it is time to eat, consider scheduling a mealtime a little earlier or offering the snack prior to the meal a little later. For instance, if dinner is at 6:30 and your child is almost always hungry by 5:30, either change dinner time to 5:30 or move the 2:30 snack to 3:30.

If your child won't eat, don't force, coax or make an issue of eating. Doing this usually makes matters worse. Your child can sense when mealtime is a battleground and may turn eating into a power game. This, in turn, can lead to real feeding problems. You need to send the message that mealtime is pleasant. For at least one meal a day, you should try to eat the entire meal with your child instead of bouncing around the kitchen. Dinner is the meal that most families eat together. In some families, however, parents return home from work too late to eat dinner with their child. In such situations, children often eat dinner before their parents eat. If your child eats early but is not in bed when you eat dinner, be sure to acknowledge your child and talk to him while you eat. You might give your child a bedtime snack while you eat. Doing this will allow your child to take part in a family meal; which is very important. Eating dinner as a family is desirable, but

it is not always practical. If you cannot eat dinners together, consider substituting or alternating with breakfast.

## IDEAS & ACTIVITIES



When you and your child are playing with stuffed animals or dolls, pretend to feed them a variety of healthy foods. Talk about how much the teddy bear likes broccoli and how the doll's favorite food is pears. You can pretend to eat a variety of foods too.



If the weather is nice, take your child to a local farmer's market or outdoor produce stand. Show your child all of the fresh fruits and vegetables. Talk with your child about the colors and how good the foods taste. Let your child pick one new fruit or vegetable to bring home for your family to try.



When reading to your child, show him pictures of people eating a variety of healthy foods. Ask your child to point to different food items. Talk about how healthy foods help bodies to grow big and strong. Also, explain that healthy foods give us the energy to play.



Give your child a different item to hold in each aisle of the grocery store. As you are shopping, talk with your child about the item he is holding. For instance, in the produce aisle let your child hold a banana. Tell your child that the banana is a yellow fruit. Explain that you peel the banana before you eat it. In the dairy aisle trade the banana for a container of yogurt. Tell your child that yogurt is a dairy food. Explain that you eat dairy food to make strong bones.

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