

Make changes to your Eating Rules

We all have mealtime rules for our children that are supposed to keep the meal under control, pleasant, and healthy. However, some eating rules really are not that healthy or helpful at all. We suggest you review the following:

 **Clean your plate!!**
Everyone has heard this said and many were raised with it. The problem with this eating rule is that it ignores appetite. What if your child eats half or $\frac{3}{4}$ of his meal and is satisfied? Should he or she continue to eat?

If you think, *why yes!, of course my child should eat everything I have given him to eat*, then re-think this. Research shows that children who belong to the clean plate club, or who routinely finish their meal as a rule, may experience a disconnect with their internal appetite regulators (losing the ability to easily recognise their fullness) and may eat more than their body needs.

 **Eat this First and then you can have....**
Rewarding with a coveted food such as dessert is a common motivational tool used by parents to get children to eat something more desirable, such as vegetables or other healthy food.

Interestingly, when food rewards are used, children can start to value the reward food with higher regard than the healthy food giving greater importance to the reward food which is usually less nutritious. And also some children will eat more than they need just to get the reward food.

 **Finish your veg**
Very much like the clean plate club outcome discussed above, mandating that children eat all of their vegetables (or any other food) increases the risk of disarming their natural appetite control. In a nutshell, finishing any food beyond one's appetite is not good practice.

Additionally, mandating a child to eat any particular food can turn them off from learning to like and enjoy it – we know that everyone worries that their children are have a balanced diet but force feeding items it not the way to do it. Continue to hide the veg into pasta sauces etc if your child will not try something on its own.

 **Just try a bite**
Parents are often worried, justifiably, about making sure their children get enough to eat. They may encourage their children to polish off another bite of food (or two or three). This can translate to kids feeling pressured. As a parent, you only have to take a step back and see this tactic through a child's eye. It's similar to the hard sell from the car dealership, or the pressure to make a decision before you are ready. That level of pressure makes you want to turn and run the other way, right? Children feel the same way when they are pressured to eat more or try something new of which they are unsure.

Bottom line: Pressuring children to eat often backfires, leading them *away* from eating or trying new food.

Why can't I go play now?



Many children are finished eating and ready to leave the table before their parents. Children tend to eat more quickly than adults and want to move on to the next thing. On average toddlers and young children finish eating in 15-20 minutes (even less sometimes), while older children (7+) and teens tend to be finished in 20-30 minutes.

Keeping the expectations realistic is important. Keeping a child at the table too long can turn into a negative experience. Also, overly focusing on a child's performance such as eating all of the meal and having good manners may set up a dysfunctional relationship with food, turning an enjoyable part of the day into one associated with anxiety or dread. Remember that you have a daily opportunity to teach your children social skills surrounding table manners etc so not everything needs to be tackled in one go.

Don't take food out of your mouth



Just to clarify one point - tasting food does not equal eating food. Tasting can take the form of licking, putting food in the mouth and taking it straight out of the mouth, chewing food for a bit and spitting it out, or any combination of these.

To adults it seems unpleasant but for some children, especially hesitant eaters, one of the best ways to become comfortable and familiar with new food is to put it in the mouth, explore it, and take it out. Pressuring a child to swallow their food can have negative consequences in the long run as makes a child more anxiety about eating over all.

Follow through with Consequences



Handling food by touching it is a sensory experience. Many young children do well with eating when they can explore food with their hands first. Young children, especially, are hands-on and need this experience to develop positive sensory associations with food and eating.

While you should strive to help your child learn to use utensils, you should also recognise that this takes time (years to be proficient!). Keep your expectations realistic, let your child pick a little, and ease into using utensils. Also, as much as possible, get them interested in the preparation of food from as young as possible as this leads to increased knowledge and enthusiasm about food.