

MANAGING MEAL TIME

When a child won't eat

Here are some tips to try when a child refuses to eat, to try new foods, or will eat only one or two foods for days:

Don't force them to eat if they don't seem hungry. The child may be going through a slow growth period and may not be hungry. Also, when children are very active or ill, or if they are worrying about something, they may not be hungry.

Don't use food as a reward. "Eat your vegetables or you won't get dessert" gives the impression that dessert is better than vegetables. Avoid using food as a reward or a punishment. Serve dessert casually, as a part of the meal.

Start with small servings. A good rule of thumb is one tablespoon of food for each year of a child's age. Kids are easily turned off by adult size portions.

Remember variety. Serve a variety of fruits, vegetables, milk, meat cheese, cereals, breads and desserts. For extra interest, cut meat into strips; cut vegetables and fruits in rings. Serve the food in a pretty dish; make a raisin face on oatmeal.

Offer choices. Help the children to feel more independent and in control by offering them choices whenever possible. For example, "Do you want peas or broccoli for lunch?"

Introduce new foods when the children are well-rested and happy. Only introduce one new food at a time. Serve the new food at a meal with other well-liked foods.

Get the children to help with the meal. They are more likely to try foods they have helped select, clean or prepare.

Recognize that many children have "food jags." They want to eat only one or two foods for days on end. Try not to make an issue of this normal, frustrating behavior. Wait a few days and they probably will be eating a variety of foods again. It is alright if they do not choose to eat everything you have prepared. You have still done your job and they won't starve.

Set a good example. Children are great imitators. They watch what we do. If we refuse some foods, they also will be pickier about what they want to eat.