



# “Me Don’t Want It”

## Helping Your Toddler to Eat Happy and Healthy

Many parents struggle with their toddlers over eating. Parents want to make sure their toddlers are eating enough, not eating too much, and eating the right things. Toddlers’ needs change as they grow and develop. Many toddlers eat less than they did as babies, because they don’t need as many calories. Toddlers want to be in charge and are developing their own likes and dislikes. Toddlers are also very inconsistent with lots of behavior, including eating. Sometimes they eat a lot, sometimes they don’t. Many times, parents’ wishes clash with toddler needs and the result is — mealtime battles!!

As long as a child is growing normally and is showing no signs of illness or other distress, she is probably getting the food she needs. Experts agree that children can respond to their own hunger signals, as long as they are not forced to eat when they are not hungry, or are not fed when they are hungry. Children will eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full. They are pretty good at getting their bodies what they need. Does this mean you should let your toddler eat whatever she wants? NO! Parents should still offer nutritional choices and let their toddlers decide which of those foods to eat and how much.

Many parents struggle with using food to discipline or comfort their child. Using food to bribe, reward, or comfort a child can give food too much power. Many children begin to associate food with something that can make them happy or sad. Food can become a crutch that a child turns to for comfort. This may help in the short term, but doesn’t build self-control or self-esteem. It’s OK to give food treats on occasion—food can be really enjoyable—but don’t link it to whether or not your child is good or upset. Remember that food is fun and healthy, but don’t give it power over your child’s emotions or behavior.

### Tips for promoting healthy eating habits

- **Establish regular family mealtimes.** Use this time to talk and enjoy each other’s company. Create a fun, relaxed, and special time together. But don’t push too hard for “quality time.” A fun ten-minute family dinner is probably the limit for many busy toddlers.
- **Offer nutritional choices and keep portions small.** Toddlers often like three or four different kinds of food at a meal, with different textures and tastes. Don’t overwhelm your toddler with a heaping pile of food on her plate. You can always give her more if she finishes.
- **Give your child some control.** Let her choose between your choices of nutritional foods. Let her decide when she is done.
- **Make mealtimes fun!** Let your child help prepare the meal. Offer finger foods and dipping sauce. Make fun shapes with sandwiches or pasta. Make blue mashed potatoes!
- **Model good eating habits.** Help your child learn by your healthy example.
- **Praise good eating and avoid bribery.** Giving sweets to get your child to eat her peas may work in the short term but may be setting up bad eating habits. If your child indicates that she is not hungry, don’t give dessert. “After food, then some dessert. If you’re not hungry, that’s fine . . . but no dessert.”

Developed for Healthy Steps<sup>SM</sup> for Young Children by BUSM<sup>®</sup>: Department of Pediatrics, Boston Medical Center



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