

# Appetite slump in toddlers

Reviewed by SickKids Staff | Last updated: June 4th 2010

An easy-to-understand overview of loss of appetite in toddlers, and tips on how to improve feeding at meal times.

## Key points

- If your child appears healthy and happy, there is probably no reason to be concerned about a temporary slump in appetite.
- Follow the "division of responsibility": as a parent, you are responsible for the "what" of feeding — breast milk, formula or food. Your baby is responsible for everything else — when, where, how much, how fast.
- Make mealtime fun.
- Serve small portions frequently.
- Vary your child's menu.
- Do not force feed or use food as a reward or punishment.
- Avoid distractions at mealtimes.

There are times when your child may have lost their appetite, or does not want to eat at meal time. This can be discouraging and concerning. Still, there are simple ways to make meal times an enjoyable time for you, your child, and the entire family.

The eating habits your child develops as a toddler can determine their habits for the rest of their life. Poor eating habits are hard to break. Eating in a healthy, positive atmosphere helps children to develop healthy attitudes about food and themselves. Eating together is one way to help your child develop healthy attitudes about food.



## Causes of an appetite slump in your child

Illness sometimes causes loss of appetite. If your child has a [sore throat](#), rash, [fever](#) or other symptoms, your child may be sick. Contact or see a doctor if your child seems unwell or is not getting better.

If illness is not the cause of the appetite loss, there are several reasons why your child may not be eating. The causes may include:

- your child is eating between meals
- your child is drinking juice or other liquids (other than water) between meals
- your child is exerting less energy than usual

For children over 1 year old, appetites increase and decrease according to age, energy levels, periods of growth, and temperament.

If your child appears healthy and happy, there is probably no reason to be concerned about a temporary slump in appetite.

## Fuel your child's appetite

There are some ways you can encourage your child to eat.

### Make meal time fun

Meal times are important social times for growing children. Try to make this time of the day more enjoyable for your child. Offer your child different foods and have them choose which foods they will eat. Try not to focus on what your child is NOT eating, but rather focus on what they ARE eating. Show by example that eating is fun and enjoyable.

### Division of responsibility

Some health providers encourage parents to adopt a feeding theory called "division of responsibility". According to this theory, parents are responsible for providing the "what" of feeding and the child is responsible for "how much" they will eat. That means the parent is in charge of offering food to the child and helping the baby or young child become calm and organized during feeding. As the child grows older, the parent chooses and prepares the food, provides regular meals and snacks, makes eating times pleasant, and provides a good role model for the child by enjoying food at mealtimes. Parents should forbid eating between meals or snacks. Between these times, try to encourage drinking only water. This theory helps parents trust that their child will get enough nutrients from the food they choose.

### Serve small portions frequently

Children have smaller stomachs than adults. They do not eat as much at meals. Five or six smaller meals or snacks may better meet your child's caloric needs. This may also cause less trouble at mealtimes.

### **Vary your child's menu**

When you prepare your child's meal, try to include food from each of the four major food groups:

- Whole [grain products](#) such as breads, pasta, rice, cereals, and other grain products enriched with [iron](#), [folic acid](#) and other B vitamins, including [niacin, thiamin, and riboflavin](#).
- Offer your child lots of [vegetables and fruit](#) in bite-sized portions.
- [Milk](#), yoghurt, cheese and other dairy products offer a balance of [proteins, carbohydrates](#) and [fats, calcium](#) and [vitamin D](#).
- Lean [meats](#), poultry, and fish, as well as tofu, beans, and lentils provide your child's body with proteins, fats, vitamins and minerals (such as iron).

Your child may have their favourite foods, but new foods can be introduced little by little. Be prepared for your child to reject new foods at first.

### **Do not force-feed**

Mealtimes should be a pleasant time for the entire family. It is not a good idea to coerce your child to eat against their will. It may discourage your child from eating that particular food in the future. Ordering your child to finish everything on their plate may have the same effect. Refusing food may be a way for your child to assert their independence. Health providers say that most children will eat what they need.

### **Avoid distractions**

Do not feed your child with the television blaring nearby. Other distractions like toys or books should also not be brought to the table while eating.

Other helpful tips to make eating more enjoyable:

- Prepare your child for mealtimes. Let them know 10 or 15 minutes before you serve the meal.
- Encourage your child to help prepare meals. They can wash vegetables or stir ingredients.
- Serve drinks only after the main course so that your child does not fill up on liquid.

- Put some newspaper under and around your child's chair to avoid tiring clean-up after the meal.
- Model healthy eating habits for your child. Make sure to eat nutritious foods and eat slowly.
- Give fun names to those foods your child does not like (such as "yummy tree broccoli").
- Never use food as a reward or punishment.

Please visit [AboutKidsHealth.ca](https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca) for more child health information.

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