



## Mealtimes are easier with Montessori

The Montessori approach attempts to set the child for success early, and may be different from what we experienced as children! We do this by building healthy habits from the start. Mealtimes are an important, daily family occasion, where great attention is paid to creating a beautiful but functional setting, in allowing the child to participate in preparing the meal, and as often as possible sharing mealtimes with the family. Mealtimes are more enjoyable when the child is part of the process. Choose your special family daily mealtime together and protect it as much as possible; it could be breakfast or dinner. We begin to include our baby in the family meal so that they learn the social meaning of food for interaction and human company. The key starting place is always to establish consistent expectations, and supporting the child's independence.



An important part of the adult's role is to lay the foundations for the toddler's relationship with food, positive attitude toward food and for healthy eating habits. When parents and other caregivers find themselves feeding their toddler, chasing after them with food, bribing them to eat, or they need to be constantly distracted by something else to eat, it's time to reassess the situation!

## Guidelines to make mealtimes easier

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[Be consistent with the rules.](#)

Expectations such as sitting at the table for meals help the children to learn: meals are enjoyable social occasions and a time for connecting with family or perhaps visitors, It is safer than walking with food in their mouth and cutlery in their hands, food stays at the table, and that doing one thing at a time is best, either eating or playing not both.

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Constantly use language to describe what you are doing and feeling, and ask your child to do the same.

Teach your baby signs for "please" "thank you" "more" "full" so they can communicate before they can verbalise. We use a lot of language during our family meals, encouraging Benji to be part of the conversation as much as he is able, talking about family life and planning our day. As your child gets older, you can start involving the child in planning the meals of the day, discussing choices of protein, and vegetable, and carbohydrate. Start having conversations with your young child about different kinds of food and the proper healthy nutrition that our body needs.

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Give your toddler choices.

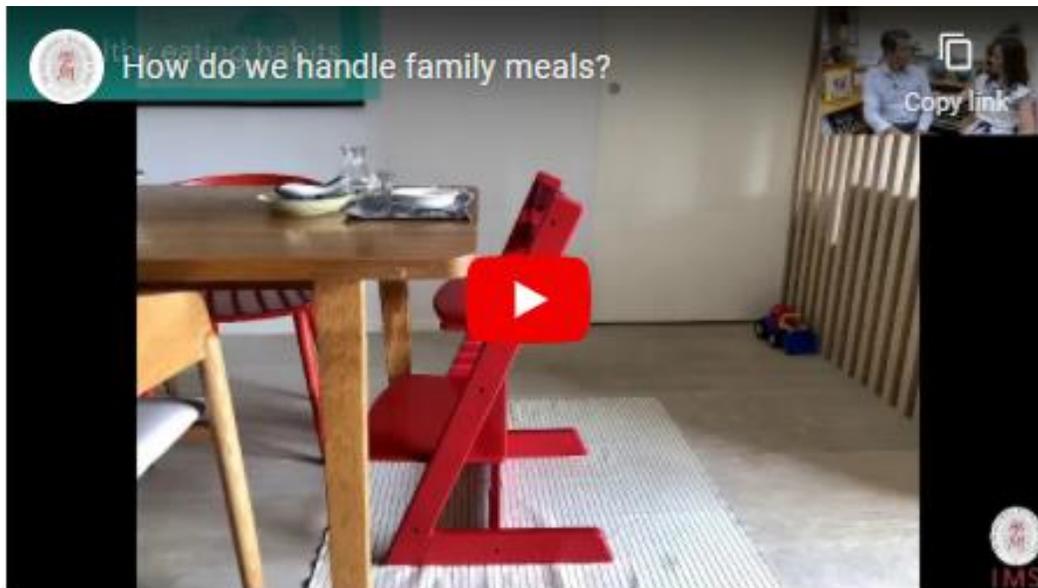
Try introducing the child to a variety of dishes and cuisines in your family meal - peer pressure is a wonderful way to encourage a child to try something new! As we are helping the toddler to make a choice, we can offer them choices that we find acceptable, and we think they will learn to enjoy too. Toddlers may not yet be capable of making healthy food choices by themselves, but they will learn about these choices by the food we offer and the conversations we engage them in.

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Have at least one mealtime together as a family each day.

Parents are the best models for the children to learn table manners and to learn that mealtimes are social occasions. So it is great to have meals together with your little one. Find times to eat with your child too to allow them to observe the mechanisms of how we actually eat. Remember, little ones are really learning through observation; you know if you've ever had a baby stare at your mouth while you're chewing your food. Show how you're using the cutlery. Slow down your movements. Show how you place the cutlery down and chew slowly before taking a new bite. These are the grace and courtesy

and movement lessons that our little ones are acutely sensitive to. They're fascinated about learning to become like us.



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#### Set up the Environment.

As soon as children are ready to take in solid food and are able to use their hands to feed themselves, from 12 months we can begin to have them join family meals. During family meals, we can use a high chair so that the child can be included in the ritual of meal time. Use the high chair for meals whenever the family can gather together. Ideally it pulls right up to the table like this one so that the child is eating at the family table together with us, and is physically closer. This style of high chair also allows the child to climb in and out of the chair on their own, which is really important to supporting the child becoming aware of their own body's hunger cues. We encourage the child that they are free to leave when they feel full.



It could get messy!

The high chair without the usual straps and the tray table in front keeps them closer to the table. Have the child start the meal at the table and promote keeping the child stay on until he decides that he has had enough. You can say, "You listened to your body and it said you are full." When there is a need to pack leftover food, it is helpful to involve them in the process and model clearing things away. It is important that the child is clear that the meal is all done and there will be more food at the next meal. The physical environment is always a focus in Montessori. We can start focusing on developing eating habits as young as six months, when they start experimenting with solids. We would give the six month old an individual space where he can sit on his own and enjoy his snacks or meals at his level. We use a tiny table and chair that he can get in and out of when he likes. From the beginning, encourage self-

feeding in an age appropriate way. We use real tools to give the child feedback. So infants and young toddlers will be using their hands mostly. It will be messy, but it's a process. You can still have the cutlery out so that your little one knows that they are tools for him to use. You can preload the spoon with easy to eat food like yoghurt.



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[Increase independence around meal times as your child grows.](#)

The more my toddler can do for himself, the happier he is - he feels successful. As he gets older, I always try to think about how to expand the steps to make it more inclusive. So for example, in the photo here you can see the blueberries are on a communal sharing plate, we don't plate the food for Benji. We can encourage the young toddler as soon as they are walking to begin to help prepare for a meal; setting the table. We can do this if we set-up a small space where they can access their own dishes, placemat, cutlery. It could also be a low drawer or a low shelf in the kitchen. I don't have extra storage space so I'm using a repurposed trolley.



Blueberry & tongs

It's important to note with a young toddler, some days they'll need more support than others, some days they won't want to participate, and you need to accept this. Many days at first, it means that you're going to be doing it all, but every time you do, you're modelling and showing how to walk slowly and carefully with two hands around each item. Always give your little one room to participate, but don't expect them to always be able to follow through. Don't give up though and pile it all up on a tray. Your little one is learning from what you are doing; they're always watching - and listening too - so say what you're doing. They're getting a lot of rich language that way: "I'm carrying the glass jug of milk." With toddlers it's going to become more collaborative: "Could you help me with this?"

Counting: We deliberately start with only one of each item in the trolley set up. At 16 months they don't yet understand the concept of quantity. But as they get older, we always try to adjust to set the young child up for success. As they get closer to 2 ½ to 3 you can ask them how many items they need. As they approach late age 3, they can begin to count how many people are coming for

dinner, and set the table appropriately for the group. That's a direct preparation for mathematics!

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#### How much food does my child need?

Thankfully, the days of being told (or forced) to eat everything on our plates are long gone. To support the child's learning about their body, the adult should begin leaving the child in charge and to trust that he is having enough. Generally, toddlers will not starve themselves! They typically take in as much as they need, unless it becomes a power struggle, and without adult control around food the toddler is much freer to learn to listen to their bodies. This is also a time for the adult to learn to trust that the toddler is - and needs to - gain this self-awareness for themselves. This is the beginning of self-regulation and self-discipline. We aim to help our children learn to listen to their bodies to understand when they are full. Parents can help the young child to create a way to express himself when he is full. The toddler may be helped to use signs and gestures before he can speak. Use clear language to repeat what the child is signing, or saying "Are you sure you are full? Once you get down you are finished. Our next meal is ... Are you sure you are finished?" It is important to respect the child's expression with a clear understanding that the meal is done and when the next meal would be.

Consistency is about assisting the child to learn to listen to his body, giving him a choice as to how much he wants to eat but at the same time helping the toddler understand that our family eats at mealtimes. This helps the child to fit into the daily rhythm of family life. Life is much easier for everyone when the very young toddler learns that meals are offered and served at regular times of the day and that the kitchen is not open at all times.

One approach to building healthy eating habits is that when my toddler doesn't particularly like the family meal, we ask, and then we pack up the leftover food

for snack at a later time if he's hungry later. That way there is no incentive for him to hold out for a better snack!



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### [Help! My child is a picky eater!](#)

Introducing the child to a variety of nutritious food is very important in helping create healthy eating habits. When a child first tastes solids, it takes a number of times before the child "likes" a food, so don't give up! We look to the Montessori principles in this situation, and suggest trying to understand from the child what the issue is.

For the toddler, choice is extremely important, and if your child is refusing to eat vegetables, or anything that isn't beige, or only eats pasta, it may be that they aren't getting enough choice and this has become a battle for control. Or is it the texture of the food he doesn't like? If you child won't eat anything but pasta, for example, you could try intentionally omitting pasta as one the choices as you are planning the meal, or coming up with different pasta dishes with new vegetables and protein sources. When you suspect that the child is using this as a form of control, it is worthwhile to look at other areas in the child's life. The question to ask is, "Is my child getting as many opportunities as

possible to make a choice?" Would you like peas or carrots for dinner? Red or blue socks? Do you like to play in the playground or in the garden? Offering them these kinds of choices as often as possible is very important in helping the young child feel more in control.



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## Workshop series.

Matthew Sneyd & Jennifer Yu talk with parents about Surviving & Thriving with your preschooler during the global pandemic in a 4-part Workshop series.

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[Home Learning with Preschoolers](#)



- 03:10 Understand the needs of your preschooler
- 05:19 Take advantage of your home to maximise learning
- 06:24 Learning through doing
- 26:55 Activities that will keep your preschooler entertained
- 27:46 How to cope with cabin fever

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### Daily Challenges with Preschoolers



Setting up little ones for success in daily Routines:

- 02:33 Bedtime
  - 18:08 Healthy Eating
  - 34:34 Learning to use the Toilet
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Language and Emotional development for Preschoolers



Infusing everyday activities with language that expands vocabulary growth, curiosity and cognitive development:

- 01:04 Using language to set your child up with a positive, proactive growth mindset
  - 07:53 The importance of reading to your little one as a predictor of outcomes
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## Sensory & Motor Development



- 02:23 Toddlers and preschoolers are compelled to touch and grasp everything around them, and are almost always on the move
- 09:30 How do parents safely and constructively support this necessary part of development?