



Delicious and Nutritious: Meals for Families with Toddlers

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Providing healthy family meals your toddler approves of may seem nearly impossible to do. Oftentimes, it seems like toddlers go through phases of not wanting to eat what is prepared for the family. Furthermore, it seems like healthy eating can take too much time to prepare. These challenges can make busy parents feel overwhelmed and desperate for a solution.¹

This publication is intended to help parents find ways to include healthy, age-appropriate options that are a part of regular family meals.

Benefits of Eating Healthy Meals

With all the messages about nutrition circulating in the news, a review of the facts, as they relate to our toddlers, can be a helpful start.^{2,3} Healthy meals can:

- Fuel children's brains for learning.

- Boost children's immune systems.
- Build a solid start for good health and life-long healthy habits.
- Give children vitamins and minerals their growing bodies need.
- Set children up for a lower risk of developing chronic diseases later in life.

Making Meals for the Entire Family

Preparing healthy meals for your toddler does not mean you need to make special food for them and different food for you! Your toddler can have the same foods you can. However, they usually need smaller portion sizes, and they often require modifications to the food, such as providing smaller pieces to prevent choking.^{4,5} See Box 1 for common foods that can cause choking.

Box 1: Foods and Food Portions to Avoid That Can Cause Choking^{4,5}:

- Sticky foods like peanut butter, other nut or seed butters, large marshmallows, gum, honey (not recommended before baby's 1st birthday), and large pieces of soft, moist breads.
- Hard foods such as nuts, seeds, popcorn, hard candies.
- Large pieces of meat, fruits, vegetables, or any other food item that is large enough to be a choking hazard.

You may have noticed that your toddler is interested in what you are eating--and indeed they are! They want to eat what you eat, so let them have a taste.⁶ Box 2 describes how foods can be modified for your toddler's safe consumption.

Box 2: Common Foods That Need Modification to Avoid Toddler Choking:

- Bananas - cut in slices or further into half slices.
- Grapes, steamed carrots, hot dogs - cut into slices and then in half to even fourths.
- Fruits like apples and pears - remove the peel as young toddlers have a hard time chewing through the peel, and it often gets stuck on the roof of their mouths or down their throat and causes gagging or choking.
- Meats and cheeses - ensure they are soft enough for your toddler to chew and always dice meat and cheese into small bits.
- Dry foods like boiled egg yolks or melba toast - give in small bits under direct supervision.

Meals for Your Toddler

Your toddler is interested in what you are eating. Cooking the same food for yourself as you do for your child allows them to feel part of the family mealtime. It also helps ensure he or she will develop tastes for the same foods the rest of the family enjoys.⁶

It is important to note, if you feel that you are not following a healthy diet, you can start by making one healthy change at a time. Over time, healthy choices can become part of your family's eating habits, and healthy food choices will simply be the norm as your child grows.

In Table 1, there are family meal ideas written with toddler modifications in mind. All foods mentioned in the table can be paired with fruits and vegetables with the appropriate softness and cut in sizes suited for your toddler's needs.

You can use the meal ideas to build a menu for yourself. Try choosing one new food from the list to add to your daily or weekly menus for the next 2-3 weeks. The more your

child sees the food, the more familiar they will become. And if you are introducing a new food item to your toddler, pair it with something you know they like so they can associate the new food with a food in which they have had positive experiences.



How Much Food Does Your Toddler Need?

Your toddler does not need the same portion as an older child or adult. Providing foods with variety and in the right portions can help a toddler get the nutrition he or she needs to grow.

Toddlers even have their own suggested portion sizes from the USDA. If you are not sure how much your child's daily needs from each food group are, Table 1 has the USDA's recommendations listed separately for two and three-year-olds with examples of serving sizes.

How Can Nutritious Meals Work for You Day-to-Day?

It can be easier than you think to ensure that your toddler obtains their daily nutrition. This section reviews a few meal ideas and how they meet the USDA requirements in Table 1.

Table 1: Daily Food Group Requirements for Toddlers^{9,10,11}

Food Group	2-year-old (Needs for one day)	3-year-old (Needs for one day)	Serving Examples
Grains	3 ounces (recommended that ½ are whole grains)	4-5 ounces (recommended that ½ are whole grains)	1 ounce = 1 slice of bread, ½ cup of cereal, such as oatmeal
Vegetables	1 cup	1 ½ cups	Use a measuring cup to check the amount.
Fruits	1 cup	1-1 ½ cups	Use a measuring cup to check the amount
Dairy	2 cups	2 cups	1 cup = 1 cup of milk or yogurt, 1 ½ ounces of cheese
Protein	2 ounces	3-4 ounces	1 ounce = 1 ounce of meat, ¼ cup of cooked beans (e.g., pinto beans) or 1 egg

Meal Idea: Quesadilla cut in pieces (a pizza cutter works nicely) with diced steamed veggies

This meal provides approximately:

- 1 ounce of grains from the tortilla
- ½ cup of vegetables
- ½ cup of dairy from the cheese



This photo is an example of the Quesadilla Meal Idea above. It would need to be cut into bite-sized pieces appropriate for a toddler's needs.

Meal Idea: Pasta salad with diced, fresh vegetables, shredded cheese, diced ham, and grapes cut in fourths

This meal provides approximately:

- 1 ounce of grains from the macaroni
- ½ cup of vegetables
- ½ cup of fruits
- ¼ cup of dairy from the cheese
- 1 ounce of protein from the meat



This photo is an example of the Pasta Salad Meal Idea above. It would need to be cut into bite-sized pieces appropriate for a toddler's needs.

Table 2 gives several ideas for toddler-friendly meals the whole family can eat. These ideas can be used alone or spark your own ideas for meals you already prepare for your family.

Table 2: Toddler-Friendly Meals and Snacks the Whole Family Can Eat^{7,8}

Breakfast Ideas	Lunch Ideas	Dinner Ideas	Snack Ideas
Scrambled Eggs with small pieces of toast	Pasta with Marinara, Pesto, or a low-fat Cheese Sauce	Mashed Sweet Potatoes, with small pieces of shredded chicken	Small slices of cheese with crackers
Yogurt with diced fruit and Oats	Quesadilla cut in parts (a pizza cutter works nicely) with diced steamed veggies	Pasta with steamed carrot quarters	Applesauce or pear sauce with waffle pieces
Oatmeal with applesauce	Hummus with Pita pieces	BLT plate: take pieces of bacon, lettuce, and tomatoes and pair with small slices of bread	Mozzarella and cherry tomato pieces
Smoothies with both fruits and vegetables	Ham and cheese sandwich, pressed, and cut in small pieces	Mashed potatoes, squares of ham, and steamed green beans	Small apple pieces with yogurt dip
Cottage Cheese with small pieces of fruit	Quinoa or rice with mashed black beans	Rice with avocado and chicken pieces	Whole grain crackers with thinly sliced strawberries
Homemade, wholegrain fruit or veggie muffins	Lard free refried beans with cheese and soft corn tortilla pieces	Pasta shells with frozen peas with Marinara, Pesto, or a low-fat Cheese Sauce	Blueberries sliced with cottage cheese

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