Helping your toddler 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 in many behaviors, 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. Try embracing a responsive feeding approach: “Parent provides, child decides.”

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 10-minute family dinner is probably the limit for many active toddlers.

- Offer nutritious 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 his plate. You can always give him more if he finishes.

- Give your child some control. Let her select from 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.

- Model good eating habits. Help your child learn by your healthy example.

- Acknowledge good eating and avoid bribery. Giving sweets to get your child to eat his peas may work in the short term but may be setting up bad eating habits.