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GOOD  
FOOD HABITS  
FOR  
CHILDREN



"Now good digestion  
wait on appetite  
And health on both!"



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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT  
OF AGRICULTURE

GOOD  
FOOD HABITS  
FOR  
CHILDREN

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AN EARLY



START !

**F**OOD HABITS are established early. Children should be guided from the first to develop the desire to eat the right foods. Forming a good habit is a step in character building; developing the habit of eating the right foods is the foundation of good nutrition. Character building and body building in this way go hand in hand.

The normal, rapidly growing child has a good appetite. He comes to the table eager for his meal, and he eats with zest the food set before him. He has developed good food habits under guidance. When children dawdle over their food or refuse it, their habits of eating need to be retrained. The suggestions given here are for parents who are directing the building or rebuilding of their children's food habits.

*Liking Is A Matter Of Learning*

Accustom the child early in his life to a variety of foods, one by one. By the end of his first year the baby should have been given repeatedly eggs and some of the more usual fruits, vegetables, and cereals as supplements to his principal food, milk. Start with small amounts and increase the portion gradually. Allow the baby the chance to learn the flavor and texture of one new food before another one is introduced to him.

He may object to new foods at first; in fact it is not uncommon for a baby to spit out the first few mouthfuls of any food that is strange to him. He has to get used to new tastes, different temperatures, strange textures, and to new eating utensils. Changing the baby's diet from liquid to semisolid and finally to solid

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foods must be done step by step. Long before he gives up the bottle or the breast teach the baby to take water, fruit juice, cereal gruel, and strained vegetables from a spoon and then from a cup. Make these gruels and purees thicker in consistency until the child is prepared for the next step—mashed and scraped or finely diced fruits and vegetables. Even the young baby gets hard toast or zwieback to exercise his gums. In this way he gradually learns to chew and swallow foods of different texture and consistency so that by the age of 1½ or 2 years he has left baby foods behind him.

### *A Little At A Time*

Even when they have learned to like a number of foods children are bewildered by too much variety at once. The very young child is a "one-at-a-timer," and gets along best when allowed to clear his plate of one or two foods before anything else is given to him. Always serve children small enough portions so that they can finish the whole amount. Parents sometimes overestimate the capacity of the young child, and serve him so much that he is too discouraged to begin to eat, or that he can not finish even though he makes a good start.

### *As Regular As The Clock*

A schedule should provide regular hours for meals, exercise, and sleep in order to keep the body healthy and the appetite normal. The serving of wholesome food at regular, well-spaced intervals helps to establish in the young child the habit of eating happily and finishing promptly what is good for him.

### *As Good As The Best*

The mother's responsibility does not end with careful selection and regular hours of serving suitable food. What she offers must be well prepared and attractively served. Lumpy cereal, scorched cocoa, or orange juice containing castor oil may be the starting point of a food dislike in even a very young child. Food should never be used as a carrier of medicine.

### *Make The Setting Attractive*

Gay dishes, a bright bib, a sunshiny room, happy comradeship, food good to look at and to eat, make for good appetite and good digestion. The mother who is calm and unhurried at mealtime is a fortunate addition to this background, even for the very young baby.



TIME TO EAT!

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GIVE THE YOUNG CHILD ONLY ONE OR TWO FOODS AT A TIME

### *With or Without the Family*

Whether the children are served as a part of the family group or separately should be determined by circumstances. Choose the way that is easiest for the mother and best for the children; it need not be the same for every meal. In homes where the evening meal must be late or the noon meal hurried the children will be better off if served earlier than the rest of the family. When children eat

apart from adults there are fewer distractions and usually no questions to be answered about differences between their food and that of the grown-ups. If questions arise at the family table let the children know that they do not eat the same dishes that grown-ups eat just as they do not wear the same kind of clothes.

### *Set A Good Example*

See that children who have their meals with the family group have a chance to benefit by good examples in eating. Children are observant. They are also great imitators, and want to be "just like" the adults they admire. Choosiness in foods is often the result of imitation. Father, mother, big sister, and the rest share alike in their responsibility to set the example of enjoying carrots, spinach, or whatever the menu offers. The fewer the reminders to eat and the better the example set, the greater the result with observant children.

### *Encourage Self-Help*

The joy of accomplishment is so absorbing that the child who feeds himself seldom becomes a problem at mealtime. He is too busy and happy at the table to refuse to eat. The child as young as 15 months can learn to feed himself if he is given the chance to practice, always with his own spoon and fork that fit his small hands. Feeding one's self is a slow, awkward, and spilly process at first, and the busy mother is tempted to save time and muss by wielding the spoon herself; but this only postpones the child's independence. It is better to protect his clothing with a large bib, place his table on a washable floor, give him table tools that he can handle with ease, and then let him experience the joy of self-help. If he has a few accidents in the beginning pass them off lightly and without rebuke while he helps to clear up the muss he has made.

### *Safeguard The Appetite*

Appetite is a mental expression of physical condition. A healthy child who has played vigorously out of doors and has slept long hours with fresh air about him is, as a rule, ready to eat when called. Even on the rainy day there can be

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sufficient activity indoors to keep up the normal eagerness for food. The desire to eat is increased by hunger. One thing that encourages good appetite is, therefore, an empty stomach. Allow time between meals for the stomach to become empty so the child will have a "hungry appetite." Some food problems develop from "piecing," or eating at all hours, or from running too close a schedule of regular meals. For this reason the question of mid-morning and mid-afternoon lunch must be decided according to the child's interest in three regular meals. When such lunches seem desirable give each at a regular hour as an extra meal, and serve simple foods that will not remain too long in the stomach. Though certain sweets seem to meet these requirements, sweets are not suitable for lunches between meals or early in the meal. They are best given at the end as dessert.

### *Deal Carefully With The Upset Appetite*

Lack of appetite indicates that something is wrong. Constipation, sometimes arising from improper eating, is an all too common cause. Sufficient emptying of the bowels is essential to keeping up the desire to eat. It is encouraged by drinking plenty of water and by the use of vegetables and fruits in the diet. Fortunately, these foods are also good sources of the vitamin that increases the appetite.

Fatigue and approaching illness interfere with the normal desire to eat. The child who is tired needs a short rest without sleep just before the meal hour, and very small portions of food when he comes to the table.

Behavior upsets near or during the meal hour often destroy the appetite. The frightened, angry, or disappointed child is likely to have no interest in food or to refuse it violently. Parents must handle emotionally disturbed children carefully. Otherwise, refusal will be aggravated, or unpleasant memories will become attached to the foods in that meal.

Allow the ill, tired, or upset child to miss a meal or to eat lightly while he is temporarily out of order, and place no emphasis on refusals at such times. He may need rest or wholesome activity to restore his appetite. If poor appetite persists in spite of all efforts, consult a physician.



THE FAMILY TABLE WITH THE CHILD'S BRIGHT DISHES

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### *Children Like The Limelight*

Little children like attention, and they try at a very early age to get and keep it. Parents who are not alert to this fact often encourage wrong behavior in their children. For example, the child who is fed spoonful after spoonful of food, who hears his antics at the table described later as bad or cute, or himself pronounced an unusual child because he does not eat this or that, is likely to develop clever schemes to hold the center of interest, even if punishment is the result. In fact, some children enjoy the excitement of their parents' wrath enough to endure severe punishment under it.

Make-believe nausea and feigned stomach ache deceive many parents and gain their undivided attention. Gagging and even vomiting are often accomplished by little children who have no digestive disturbance. Such behavior seems to have a physical basis but is actually only another device to get out of eating. No schemes to stay in the limelight will be continued long if they are ignored by the grown-ups.

Adults frequently make the mistake of playing a game to "worry the food down" a slow or unwilling eater. Games to induce eating are a wearing performance at best, and are fruitless in the long run.

### *Revise Table Tactics To Retrain The Child*

Sometimes only a small change in table tactics is necessary to retrain the child who has been allowed to slip into bad food habits. If refusal to eat centers around a particular food, try a different method of preparing it. Even a new dish or device for serving, such as a small pitcher from which to pour the milk or a straw through which to sip it, may create a new interest in eating. If not, it may be



LEARNING TO FEED HIMSELF

well to stop serving the disliked food entirely for a time. When it is to be introduced again try to increase the child's interest by letting him help buy and prepare it. Be sure not to remind him of his former dislike. Serve him only a small amount when it comes on the table.

Problems connected with eating differ according to the circumstances which allowed them to begin. They can not, therefore, all be solved in the same way. Some parents have found it wise to serve any unwelcome food first in the meal, offering nothing else until the child clears his plate of that portion. With some children it is better to strike a compromise, serving at the same time the undesired and the most desired food, and requiring



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that the plate be cleared of both. A casual favorable comment by an adult at the table about the food or his preference for it may be a very effective suggestion for the child to enjoy it.

### *Better To Reward Than To Punish*

The idea of reward for success in eating is good if carefully used so that it does not seem to be a bribe. The reward may be only a word of praise. It may be a favorite dessert or a longer playtime, coming unpromised but definitely as the result of eating an unfavored food willingly, or of finishing a meal promptly. When the child does not finish let some penalty be the consequence. The parent may take the stand that if the child is not hungry enough to eat his meal he is not hungry enough to have his dessert; or if he is too tired to finish his dinner he must go to bed at once without a chance to play. Penalties should be exacted only when the child understands that they are the consequence of his own behavior. Effective punishment is enforced quietly and without preliminary threats. However, reward for success is more effective than punishment for failure. A combination of reward for success and punishment for failure wisely used gives good results in habit training.



INTENT ON POURING HIS OWN

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### *Dealing With Dawdlers And Chronic Refusers*

Dawdling is a very common bad habit among children. One method sometimes used to speed up the slow eater is to set a time limit of 20 or 30 minutes, and to remove the plate when the time is up regardless of whether it is cleared.

The chronic or violent refuser may be handled by a similar method. His plate is taken away without discussion as soon as he refuses to eat, and he is either left at the table or removed quietly without a scene. The dawdler or the refuser must have no opportunity to get food before the next meal hour either at home or from neighbors or playmates.

The absence of stress when the food is removed, and the lack of apparent concern on the part of the parents determine how long this method must be continued. Even if it takes more than two successive meals, there is much to be gained by holding out until the child eats willingly. There is much to be lost by giving in to his whims. In any case where food has been taken away it is only fair that the next plate include something that the child likes as well as the food he has refused. The correct selection of food well prepared and attractively served will help to reestablish right habits of eating by stimulating the appetite.

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### *Be Casual, But Firm*

Too much food talk defeats the desired aim. Positive comments are more effective than negative ones, but in most cases the less discussion about eating habits the better. It is wiser to adopt the casual attitude of expecting the child to enjoy his food than to emphasize that he must eat "what is good for him." Urging or forcing children to eat is not a good policy; it is likely to develop or to increase the balkiness called negativism. Quietly arranging for the "dos" and "can haves," never harping on the "don'ts" and "can't haves," but showing firmness if the child refuses, are good rules to follow in establishing food habits in the early years.

### *Try These Out On Your Toddler*

☞ *Set a time for meals, and allow no distractions during the meal hour.*

☞ *Have the food attractive in color, odor, and flavor, so that it will tempt the appetite.*

☞ *Serve small portions so that the child can clear his plate without the feeling of being stuffed.*

☞ *Take it for granted that he will eat happily everything served to him, and be sure that he becomes acquainted with a variety of foods.*

☞ *Let him feed himself, and experience the joy of self-help.*

☞ *Be consistent in responding to a child's pranks and ruses. Laughing at one time and punishing the next is never effective.*

☞ *Remember that the table is a place for good comradeship and not for discipline or nagging.*

☞ *Have no differences of authority between the parents and other adults in deciding questions about the child's eating.*

☞ *Refrain absolutely from discussing the child's eating habits with others in his presence.*

☞ *Begin to-day. The training or the retraining in food habits is too important to wait until to-morrow.*

### *Put A Building On The Foundation*

The parents' job in training in food habits is only half done when it is well begun. Much of the foundation is laid in early childhood, but new problems may develop at any time. There is always the possibility of the influence of playmates who are allowed to pick and choose what they will eat at home, or to spend money for sweets and sandwiches between meals. Furthermore, the appetite of even the best-trained child may be fickle at the time of puberty. Parents should, therefore, continue to supervise the child's eating as he is growing up. Good food habits make for good nutrition, and good nutrition is in turn the basis for sound physical development.



