

# Managing Mealtimes

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As a parent, the pressure to feed your family 'properly' can be stressful. If you have been told that your child needs to eat more food for better growth, this can create more stress at mealtimes.

Stress can lead to challenging behaviour at mealtimes. Your child may:

- refuse to eat
- leave the table
- only eat small amounts
- avoid certain foods
- have 'meltdowns'

**Reading this handout can help you learn how to respond to challenging behaviour with positive attention to make mealtimes more enjoyable.**

## How to create less stressful mealtimes

### 1. Eat together

- Have meals as a family whenever possible. Your child learns how to eat and what foods are important by watching you and their siblings. You are 'modelling' healthy eating habits.
- If your child sees you enjoying a well-balanced meal, they will likely want to try it too. If your child sees you make a "yucky" face when eating a certain food, chances are they will not like it.

### 2. Limit distractions

- Have your child sit at the table with an adult who can help them enjoy the different textures and tastes of food and the conversation at the table.
  - Avoid distractions such as TV, cellphones or iPods.
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### 3. Offer family foods to everyone

- Provide healthy foods from all food groups to your family. Choose the amounts and textures that are appropriate for your child's age. Your child will decide which foods to eat and how much to eat.
- We do not recommend making separate meals for your child.

**If you have questions about what types of foods to feed your child or the amounts to offer, ask to speak to your clinic's Registered Dietitian.**

### 4. Make mealtimes structured

Let your child know what is expected at mealtimes. For example:

- Staying in their seat during a meal.
- Eating the amount that you have decided upon (to get the recommended calories for growth).
- Finishing meals within a certain time. Try to limit meals to 20 to 25 minutes. This is a reasonable time for children to eat enough food and keep the meal enjoyable.

### 5. Give positive attention

You may want your child to eat so badly that you bargain, plead or try to force them to eat. That gives them lots of attention for not eating (negative attention). Because children want their parents' attention, your child may continue to misbehave to get more of your attention. Over time this mealtime stress can affect your relationship with your child.

You can change this situation by giving your child positive attention. This means calmly interacting with your child and giving them lots of praise for their good choices and appropriate behaviour.

#### **Consistently responding with positive attention:**

- ✓ teaches your child how to behave (encourages positive behaviour)
  - ✓ creates more structured, peaceful and enjoyable meal and snack times
  - ✓ helps your child feel good about him/herself
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## How to give positive attention

Praise, hugs and smiles are the most important ways to give positive attention. You can also reward positive behaviour, such as giving your child a sticker. They can collect stickers on a chart to earn a prize or another reward.

### Positive attention is more powerful when it is:

- ✓ **Specific.** Tell your child EXACTLY what they did that you liked. For example: “Billy, you took a big bite of those mashed potatoes. Great job!”
- ✓ **Given right away.** When you see positive behaviour, praise your child right away. If your child is rewarded often for positive behavior, they learn that they don’t have to misbehave to get attention.
- ✓ **Given often.** Spend time with your child and eat at the table with them. This lets you praise positive behaviors (sitting at the table, talking) as often as possible.

## How to use a Mealtime Sticker Chart

1. Introduce the sticker chart, by saying “We are going to start keeping track of your eating by using a sticker chart! This week, whenever you eat a snack or meal or drink your supplement, you will get a sticker here.” *Point to where a sticker will go on the chart.*
2. Check that your child understands by asking: “What will you get if you eat all your snack?... That’s right! You will get a sticker for each snack that you eat! You’re supposed to eat 3 snacks every day, so how many stickers can you get today? ... Perfect! You can get 3 stickers!”
3. Decide what prizes your child can earn. Choose something that your child enjoys doing or is particularly interested in. The prize doesn’t have to be expensive. It could be a special privilege, treat or small toy. Write down the prizes and put them in an envelope.

### Some examples of prizes:

- treat from the store
- play date with a friend
- choosing dinner one night
- one-on-one time with a parent
- movie night at home
- family game night
- toy from the ‘dollar store’

3. Decide how many stickers your child should earn to get a prize.
  - You set the number of stickers needed for a special prize. For example, at the beginning start with 3 stickers for a prize.
  - Once this has worked well and your child feels successful, change to 4 stickers for a prize. Then slowly progress to 5 and finally 10 stickers for a prize.
4. Each time your child eats a snack or meal, or drinks their supplement, give them a sticker to put on the chart.
5. When your child reaches their sticker goal, give them the envelope to open and see what special prize they earned!

**The goal is to make meal time fun and enjoyable!**

## What to do if challenging behaviour continues

**Ignore behaviour you don't want to see again.** When a challenging behaviour occurs (such as leaving table or refusing to eat) briefly ignore your child. Stop giving attention (do not give negative attention).

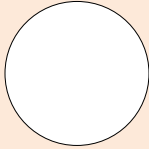
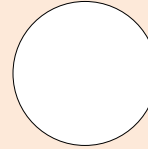
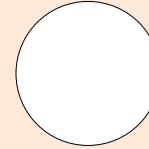
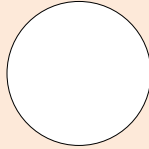
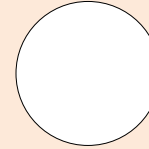
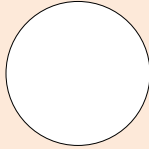
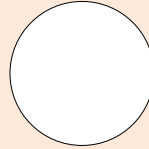
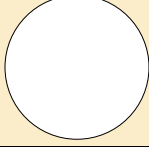
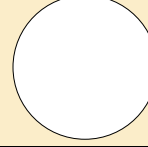
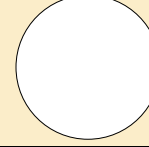
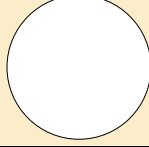
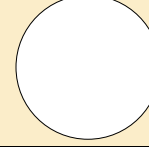
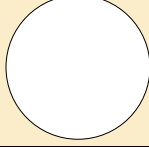
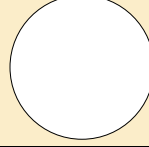
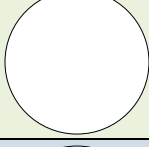
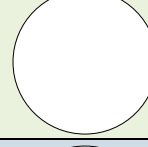
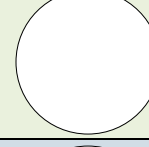
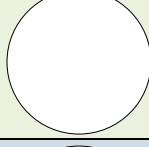
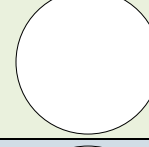
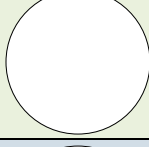
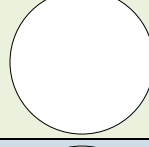
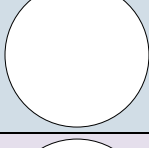
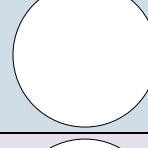
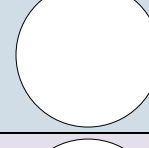
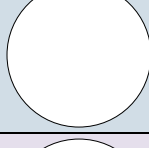
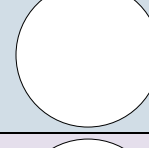
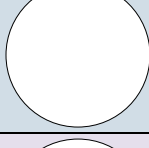
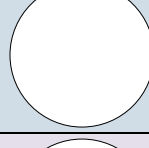
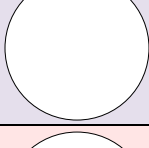
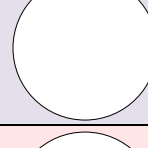
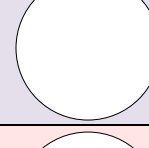
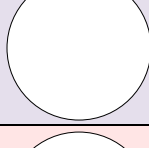
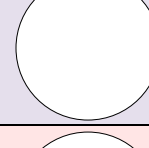
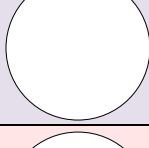
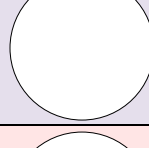
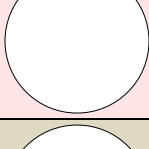
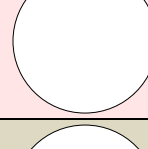
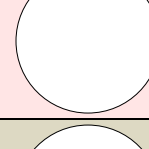
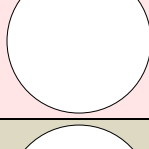
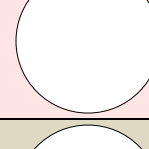
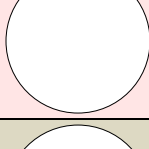
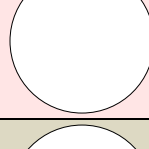
**Praise behaviour you want to see more of.** By continuing to give your child lots of positive attention for positive behaviours, the challenging behaviour will stop.

### Ignoring is more effective when it is:

- ✓ **Immediate.** As soon as your child behaves in a challenging way, ignore the behaviour (stop giving attention).
- ✓ **Used consistently.** Start by ignoring one behaviour for 2 minutes every time it occurs. Then ignore other challenging behaviours. Your child will gradually learn that your attention is only given to positive behaviour.
- ✓ **Obvious.** Make sure your child knows that you are ignoring a specific challenging behaviour.

# My Mealtime Sticker Chart!

This chart belongs to: \_\_\_\_\_

	Breakfast	Snack	Lunch	Snack	Dinner	Snack	Supplement
Monday							
Tuesday							
Wednesday							
Thursday							
Friday							
Saturday							
Sunday	