

# Mealtime Structure and Routine

## Importance of Mealtime Structure and Routine

*As always, please consult your feeding therapist for additional support*

Current research supports the use of mealtime structure and routine, as when mealtimes have more structure and routine, parents report their mealtimes are more enjoyable, their child has less “food fussiness”, and their child appears to enjoy the mealtime much more than without a structure or routine (1,2). Implementing a structure or routine to your child’s mealtime has the potential to improve picky eating tendencies without having to address the food on your child’s plate as a clear understanding of expectations and context can decrease the level of anxiety and stress a child feels.

Below are suggestions on what an *ideal* mealtime structure and routine looks like. Please consult with your feeding therapist to develop a mealtime structure and routine that works for your individual family.

### Mealtime Routine

- Unless advised otherwise by your child’s pediatrician, children should be offered a meal or snack on a regular schedule, every 2.5-3 hours to total to 5-6x/day with water only in between these meals and snacks. Meals should last 15-30 min, snacks about 10-15 min. Children should not be allowed to graze on snacks in between these scheduled snacks and meals. This helps maintain a hunger/satiety rhythm as well as healthy digestion.
- Begin and end each meal and snack with an enjoyable and brief activity for your child. This consistent activity provides a contextual cue for our children so they may prepare themselves for the meal. Handwashing is often a great option and can be completed across a variety of settings. Your feeding therapist may also suggest an alternative to support your child’s individual preferences.
- Expect your child to remain seated at the table for the duration of the snack or meal. Some children may benefit from using a timer to understand the timing of the meal/snack. If your child does choose to leave the table, remind your child food and drink remain at the table as consuming foods while walking around the home poses a choking risk.

## Mealtime Structure

- Mealtimes should be a social experience for your child as children learn how to eat and gain comfort with novel foods through watching others engage with these foods. Offer meals and snacks when another family member is eating, with both members preferably eating the same foods.
- Eliminate the use of distractions, including the television, iPad, tablet, and/or toys.
- Encourage independence through responsive feeding. Our children are responsible for how much and whether they eat, and between 2-5 years old, they intrinsically seek independence. Allow your child to feed themselves as able and assist with their permission. Providing your child with age-appropriate independence at mealtimes encourages a positive mealtime experience for all family members involved.

### But my child will only eat if they have their iPad or tablet in front of them?

This is a common obstacle many families face as they find their children will eat more if distracted by a tablet or iPad. To comprehend the impact a device or distraction has on your child's ability to eat, it is essential to understand what demands are being required of your child during a mealtime.

Eating is the only activity our children participate in that demands full activation of our child's sensory and motor systems. Our children depend heavily on their sensory system to evaluate the food placed in front of them through their visual, olfactory, auditory, and tactile (touch) system. It is through this sensory-based evaluation that a child learns the properties of the food and how the food will change once in their mouth. When a child is distracted by a device during a mealtime, they are not able to neurologically access their sensory systems to the extent required to understand their foods and results in children mindlessly placing foods in their mouth. While this has the potential to yield an *increased volume* consumed, there is high risk the child will be taken off guard by the new food presented, leading them to refuse that food and lose trust in the caregiver providing the food. Overtime, this cycle has the potential to negatively impact the number of foods in a child's diet repertoire. Furthermore, eating is a *learned* skill children refine while watching others eat. Utilizing a device greatly decreases the child's exposure to observing others during a mealtime.

To eliminate device usage during your child's mealtimes, please consult with your feeding therapist to create individualized strategies to support your child through this process.

(1) Finnane, J. et. al., (2017). Mealtime structure and responsive feeding practices are associated with less food fussiness and more food enjoyment in children. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 49 (1) 11-18. Doi: 10.1016/j.neb.2016.08.007

(2) Powell, F. et. al., (2017). The importance of mealtime structure for reducing child food fussiness. *Maternal and Child Nutrition*, 13(2). doi: 10.1111/mcn.12296

For more information or to have your child evaluated, please contact McKibben and Monte Pediatric Therapy at [info@mckibbenandmonte.com](mailto:info@mckibbenandmonte.com)