Why Won’t My One-year-old Eat?

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Remember when feeding your baby was fun? They way he opened his mouth like a baby bird when you fed him oatmeal. They way she thumped her hands on the high chair tray waiting for another bite of mashed bananas. It was hard not to laugh as your nine-month-old slowly picked up each piece of pancake and chewed thoughtfully, or the way your eleven-month-old, covered in tomato sauce, double fisted a messy meal of cut up meatballs and elbow noodles. And then they turned one. You call your pediatrician and search the internet to ask, why won’t my one-year-old eat?

Maybe they actually did not stop eating entirely, but instead of the serene or comic meals you used to enjoy with your baby in the high chair, you now have a one-year-old who deliberately deposits each pea off of the high chair tray and

onto the floor, smooshes their potatoes all over the plate, or thrashes like a chained-up wild beast to escape their high chair. You fluster, you offer other previously enjoyed foods, you become convinced they will starve, you offer a cookie, you offer more milk, you cry.

Let us reassure you: your one-year-old most likely is acting in a normal and predictable way. In this post, we explain why many one-year-olds seem to stop eating, and how to handle your suddenly picky, food-averse one-year-old.

Recall that we pediatricians expected your newborn to gain one pound every other week. In contrast, we expect your one-year-old to gain one pound every THREE MONTHS! Your baby is now growing at a slower rate. Correspondingly, their appetites slow down.

Have you heard the saying, “Hunger is the best sauce?” The way to help your one-year-old to eat, and to avoid disordered eating, is to allow them to feel hungry. Typical toddler appetites vary from day to day. Some days they eat as much as you, and sometimes they subsist on air! Most of them thrive anyway. One reason you have pediatrician visits every 3 months with your one-year-old is to be sure they gain weight appropriately.

Here are some Do’s and Don’ts:

- DO offer the same structured meal times that you had as a child: breakfast, lunch, dinner, and one or two snacks a day. That’s plenty of opportunity to eat.
- DO make mealtime enjoyable. Gather your family together to eat as often as you can. Talk about the day, joke a bit, serve whatever you are eating as long as there are no choking hazards. To avoid frustration, include at

least one item – fruit, veggie, protein, carb, or dairy- that you are fairly sure your child will eat.

- DO serve bite sized food in small portions and allow your child to ask for more.
- DO allow your child to enjoy your company while you enjoy theirs, *even if your child eats nothing*. Respect their short attention span and allow them to go play after a few minutes of not eating anything. They can play on the floor near you while you finish your meal.
- Most importantly, DO pretend that you feel fine if they eat and fine if they don't eat. Of course you will care, but your only job is to present healthy food. It is your child's job to decide if they will eat and how much they will eat.

- Avoid letting your child graze from a bottle, breasts, or sippy cup all day. Sucking fluid is a habit. Drinking from a cup at mealtime satisfies thirst. Filling a small toddler belly with fluid all day wards off hunger and almost guarantees that your child will have no room for actual food at meal time.
- Likewise, giving food as a reward or as an activity between meals and snack times will also fill them up before it's time to actually eat.
- Avoid chasing them with food as they play or offering food while they watch a video. While this might work for a brief time, ultimately it does not improve their eating. Instead, it teaches them to eat *for you* or *for the video*, but not *for hunger*. This practice can lead to disordered eating patterns.
- Avoid feeding them or nursing them in the middle of the night. If you feed them anything substantial, you fill their bellies and they may not be hungry for breakfast in the morning. Besides, you wouldn't drink something in the middle of the night without brushing your teeth. Do the same for your child.

- Avoid too many choices. Offer the foods you have already prepared for the rest of the family, and leave the choice of “to eat or not to eat” to your toddler.

We invite you to read more about how to outwit, outplay, and outlast **picky eaters** here.

Read about many aspects of **one-year-old development**, including food refusal, here.

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