

## **Feeding Toddlers, by Malina Malkani**

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Your baby is weaned, eating solids, drinking cow's milk (or a quality plant milk) from a cup, taking fewer naps, and refusing to eat foods they used to like.

Toddlerhood has begun! Now what?

If you haven't already established a toddler feeding schedule, it's a great time to consider one.

Toddler feeding schedules help life with toddlers run a little smoother (they were certainly helpful for me!) Kids thrive on routine and do well when they know what's coming next.

Toddler feeding schedules are also easier on parents and help support responsive feeding within the structure of a dependable rhythm of meals and snacks.

When parents are responsive feeders, a feeding schedule for toddlers and babies encourages healthier eating habits and shepherds child feeding to the meal opportunities where parents decide what, when and where meals will be served, as opposed to allowing littles to graze throughout the day.

Keep reading to learn why toddlers thrive on an eating schedule. You'll also find a sample eating schedule and toddler meal plan with easy, toddler-friendly recipes.

### **Why are Toddler Feeding Schedules Important?**

Some of the benefits of a predictable meal and snack time for toddlers are:

#### **Helps prevent grazing throughout the day and eating when not hungry**

It's easy to lose track of how many Cheerios your little one has been munching on all day without a feeding schedule.

#### **Helps prevent hangry (overly hungry!) toddlers**

Little ones need to eat about every 3 hours. A toddler's tiny tummy holds a small amount of food, so they'll need to eat several times a day in order to get the nutrients and calories they need. Offering food every few hours helps keep your little one's blood sugar and moods stable.

#### **Helps prevent constant demands for snacks**

Routines and schedules are the best defense against toddlers begging for snacks all day. When parents take charge of their child's eating schedule, they have time

to plan and prepare more nutrient-dense snacks and meals rather than giving in to demands for less health-promoting options.

### **Little ones are more likely to be hungry for meals and snacks**

Toddlers don't need a lot of food to fill their bellies, so every bite counts, and we want to maximize the likelihood that they'll eat during mealtimes, which is when more nutrient-rich, balanced options tend to be served.

A schedule ensures that kids are hungry at meal times. This reduces picky eating and poor table manners (like throwing food). It also prevents filling up on snacks between meals.

## **Easy Toddler Feeding Schedule**

Toddlers ideally eat 3 meals and 2-3 snacks daily, spaced about 2 to 3 hours apart.

Most toddlers still take 1 to 2 naps a day. So, we can start by building a feeding schedule around the sleep and nap schedule.

Here's a sample toddler eating schedule:

- ***7:00 am breakfast***
- ***Nap***
- ***10:00 am morning snack***
- ***12:00 pm Lunch***
- ***Nap***
- ***3:00 pm Afternoon Snack***
- ***6:00 pm Dinner***
- ***Evening snack (optional)***
- ***Bedtime***

These times are only an example. Your toddler may be an early riser or night owl, and their day may start at a different time. Further, not all toddlers take two naps and/or are hungry for 2-3 snacks, so find what works for your family.

## **What Should Toddlers Eat?**

Kids need the nutrients that all 5 food groups provide. If your family chooses a lifestyle diet such as a plant-based diet, just make sure to provide the critical nutrients needed for healthy growth and development.

The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend limiting added sugar and choosing foods lower in sodium and saturated fat.

No matter what diet your family follows, here is some guidance on how to choose the healthiest macronutrients.

- **Healthy fats** boost brain health and lower inflammation. These include omega-3 and other unsaturated fats, found in foods including avocados, nuts, nut butter, seeds, salmon, and olive oil.
- **Complex carbohydrates** are a must for energy. Try to get most of your toddler's carbohydrates from whole grains, like those found in whole grain breads and crackers, brown rice, and whole wheat pasta.
- **Low-fat protein** builds and repairs muscles. Protein can come from plant-based sources, lean animal meats (chicken, turkey), dairy, and fish. Legumes, beans, and tofu are excellent plant-based proteins. Nuts and seeds are also great plant sources of protein that also offer monounsaturated and polyunsaturated healthy fats.

## How Much Should a Toddler Eat?

It's normal for babies to start showing a reduction in appetite at around 1-2 years old. This is because after the large growth spurts that happen during infancy, a baby's growth rate slows down at about 1 to 3 years of age, and appetite tends to follow.

According to the USDA's MyPlate, kids ages 2 to 3 need approximately 1,000-1,400 calories.

Young kids only eat small amounts of food at a time. That's why it's helpful to offer food that's packed with nutrients, but don't worry if your little one doesn't finish everything on the plate.

Once you've offered balanced meals at regular intervals throughout the day, it's up to the child to decide whether and how much of the food to eat. When we use this Division of Responsibility, kids tend to get all the vitamins and minerals they need throughout the day.

Allow your toddler to eat as little or as much as they are hungry for during meal and snack times. Trust your child's appetite as long as they're growing appropriately and following their growth curve on the growth charts.

Restricting food or forcing kids to eat can lead to an unhealthy relationship with food and raises the risk of eating disorders.

To get an idea of general portion sizes for toddlers, here's MyPlate's daily meal pattern for children 2 to 3 years old.

	Portion size	Examples of Single Portions
Fruit	1 - 1-½ cups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup raw, frozen, or cooked/canned fruit</li> <li>• ½ cup dried fruit</li> <li>• 1 small apple</li> <li>• 1 cup applesauce</li> <li>• 1 large banana</li> </ul>
Vegetable	1 - 1-½ cups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup raw or cooked/canned vegetables</li> <li>• 2 cups leafy salad greens</li> </ul>
Dairy	2 - 2 ½ cups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup dairy milk or yogurt</li> <li>• 1 cup lactose-free dairy milk or yogurt</li> <li>• 1 cup fortified soy milk or yogurt</li> <li>• 1½ ounces of cheese</li> </ul>
Protein	2 - 4 oz	<p>(Each of the below counts as a 1 oz protein portion)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1-ounce seafood, lean meat, or poultry</li> <li>• 1 egg</li> <li>• 1 Tbsp peanut butter</li> <li>• ¼ cup of cooked beans, peas, or lentils</li> <li>• ¼ cup tofu</li> <li>• ½ oz seeds</li> <li>• ½ oz nuts</li> <li>• 6 Tbsp hummus</li> </ul>
Grains	3 - 5 oz	<p>(Each of the below counts as a 1 oz grain portion)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 slice of bread</li> <li>• 1-ounce ready-to-eat cereal</li> <li>• ½ cup cooked rice, pasta, or cereal</li> </ul>

## Sample Toddler Meal Ideas & Meal Plan

Breakfast (½ oz protein, 2 oz grain, ½ oz dairy, ½ cup fruit): Easy Blender Pancakes and ½ cup yogurt, ½ cup milk or soy milk

Snack (½ cup vegetables, ½ oz protein, ½ cup fruit): mix and match the protein and fruit with Sweet and Savory Sweet Potato Toast (ricotta cheese would count as protein and dairy)

Lunch (½ oz protein, ½ cup vegetables, ½ cup fruit, ½ cup dairy): Cannellini Bean Burgers with grapes and broccoli and 4 oz milk or soy milk

Snack (1 oz protein, ½ cup vegetables): Mommy and Me Cashew Dip

Dinner: (1 oz protein, ½ cup vegetables, 1 oz grain, ½ cup dairy): Sesame Tofu Spring Bowl and 4 oz milk or soy milk

## Quick Tips for Feeding Toddlers

- Offer water between meals to quench thirst
- Provide a variety of textures and flavors to help reduce picky eating
- Eat together! Toddlers benefit from role modeling when they eat what the rest of the family is eating
- Every bite counts for little bellies, so offer nutrient-rich meals and healthy snacks
- Keep food and drinks with added sugar to a minimum
- Skip the juice altogether (recommended) or limit to a maximum of 4 oz of 100% juice per day
- Choose foods with less saturated fat and sodium
- Keep offering! Repeated exposure to foods helps reduce picky eating behaviors over time