

# TODDLER

7<sup>TH</sup> EDITION

EARLY PREVIEW

# 411

Your Child,  
Age 1 to 4  
Years

Author of  
*Baby 411* and  
*Expecting 411*

Ari Brown, MD



## The Real Toddler Food Plate

Remember that nifty food plate in the last chapter? Nicely balanced with all sorts of healthy food? Okay, let's take a look at the typical toddler food plate:

Yep, right where the fruits and veggies should be are those crackers—and the mac and cheese and cereal have muscled out other healthy stuff. So how do you change this? Let's discuss.



NEW PARENT 411:

### The Toddler Meal Playbook

- Eat one good meal a day.
- Decide you are hungry every three days.
- Eat most of your calories during snack time.

*Does this sound like your toddler? Welcome to the club! Believe it or not, your toddler will grow and thrive with this meal plan . . . if the food options are healthy ones.*

### **Q.** Every meal with my toddler is a battle. Is this normal?

The typical toddler eats as much as one meal a day or as little as once every three days. Isn't it amazing they grow on air? Every child goes through this stage, and every parent worries that their child will be malnourished. Don't be too concerned. Believe it or not, most kids get their nutritional needs met despite their quirky diets. If you are really worried, check your child's weight periodically (like once a month or so) to be sure they are gaining appropriately. Remember that toddlers and preschoolers gain weight much more slowly than infants. Check out Chapter 8, "Growth," regarding expected weight gain.

My advice? Don't get into a battle over food. I've been there, too. Staring my toddler down with a single pea on the high chair tray, saying, "Eat it!" Guess what? I failed, too. This approach fails every time. I state my mantra for toddlers: You can't make them eat, sleep, or poop on the potty. It's got to be *their* idea.

Here are some typical toddlers and practical advice on how to get them to eat.

1. **The Grazer.** Is your child more of a grazer than an eater? Do they wander around the house, returning to the kitchen or coffee table to nibble here and there? Are they more content with snacks than with mealtime with the family?

While eating five small meals a day is fine—grazing all day is not. Here are a few tips:

- Don't let your toddler walk around all day with a juice or milk cup. If you want them to have constant access to a liquid, offer water.
- Don't let your toddler graze while watching a video or TV program. They're more likely to overeat.

- Set some limits for formal mealtime. That's likely the time of day you are together as a family. Once your toddler loses interest in food, they are excused from the table for the evening.
- Make sure snacks are nutritious—that will be where the majority of their food intake will come from. View snacks as small meals, not just something to tide your toddler over.

2. **The Green Eggs and Ham Skeptic.** Every toddler has neophobia. We all do. Neophobia is a fear of new things. Humans resist trying something new that could be dangerous. In this case, if you stick to what you have eaten before, it won't kill you. A toddler will only eat a limited variety of foods—and it is only on their terms. They may love eating a turkey sandwich (cut in a particular way, and the crust removed, etc.) every day for a month and then wake up one morning and simply refuse it.

Then it's back to the drawing board for you to figure out what your toddler is willing to eat. Be patient. And keep offering new foods in a nonconfrontational way. Put the food on their high chair tray or plate and do not make a big deal about it. Don't even talk about food while you sit at the table together. Enjoy their company and conversation. Eventually Sam-I-Am (that is, you) will convince your toddler to try green eggs and ham.

Here are a few pointers:

- Be sure they are not filling up on snacks.
- Don't load up on milk. Toddlers only need sixteen ounces a day.
- Get your child to help with food preparation.
- Grow a fruit/vegetable garden with your child. If your child is more involved with preparing or growing the food, they might be more interested in eating it.

3. **The Food Fighter.** Food fight! There's more food thrown on the floor and used as finger paint than ingested.

Kids are messy, but that is part of the food experience. They will usually eat what they need to. When the food starts flying, that's your child's way of saying they are done with the nutritional part of the meal.

Here are some tips:

- Food throwing is your cue to proclaim that mealtime is over. Take them out of the high chair and let them go play somewhere else. They will quickly learn that when they throw their food, they are excused from the table.
- Remind your child at the beginning of the meal that they will be excused if food is thrown.
- Offer only a bite or two on the plate. That reduces the temptation to shoot free throws.
- Avoid spaghetti sauce for a while. It's really hard to get off the walls.
- Get a dog or borrow one. It makes for easy cleanup.



## Red Flags: Food Behaviors

Occasionally, quirky food behaviors can be a clue to an underlying problem. Check with your doctor if your toddler is:

- Refusing to eat and not gaining weight
- Unable to feed themselves by fifteen months
- Unable to or refusing to eat textured foods by fifteen to eighteen months old

Your child's doctor might do some tests to evaluate for digestive issues or refer you to a feeding therapist to assess for oral motor skill issues or sensory sensitivities.



## Reality Check: The Dessert Incentive Plan

Yes, we have all turned into our own parents at some point and tried to bargain with our toddlers. *If you eat your veggies, you can have dessert.* It always backfires!

True story: One study looked at children's attitudes about trying a new food (mild sweet peppers). One group of kids was offered incentives to try the food (stickers). In another group, no incentives were given, but the peppers were offered numerous times. Guess who ate the peppers? *The group without the stickers.* Bottom line: Tricks and gimmicks don't work.<sup>1</sup>

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### DR. B'S OPINION

*Your child will eat what they need to, when they need to. Your child will not go hungry.*

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## Q. Are all toddlers choosy eaters, or is it an American thing?

Toddlers will be toddlers—no matter where they live. And readers outside of the United States tell me this is true! But I agree that certain parenting styles enable picky eaters. Karen Le Billon, author of *French Kids Eat Everything*,<sup>2</sup> effectively summarizes the French parenting approach to food in her book. Here are some of her tips:

- Parents schedule meals and menus. Kids eat what adults eat. Kids do not eat separate meals.
- Eat family meals together, without distractions.
- Let your child know that it's okay to feel hungry between meals.
- Limit processed food.
- Eat slowly and enjoy it.

## Q. My child can't hold utensils yet. Help!

### Ages 1-2

It's frustrating to be a toddler. You want to do feed yourself but lack the skills.

Here are some ways to let your toddler feel in control, yet still eat a decent amount of food:

- **Dipping.** Give your child an edible utensil like a cracker, sliver of bread, or cheese stick. They can dip it into foods that otherwise require a spoon to eat, like yogurt, avocado dip, bean dip, hummus, or sweet potato puree.

- **Two spoons.** Give your child one spoon for them to use. You can also pitch in and offer a spoonful of food here and there.
- **Don't worry about the mess.** Your child's tray may look like a finger-painting project after the meal is over. Allow them to eat with their hands until they master the fork and spoon. And yes, dogs are really good at cleaning up.



## Reality Check: High Chair Hijinks

In another attempt for independence, you may find your toddler trying to escape their high chair. Of course, there is no federal law that requires toddlers to sit in a high chair at mealtime. So here's a solution.

Consider bringing a kid-friendly picnic table and chair set into your kitchen. That will give your toddler the autonomy to leave when they want to. Just remember to set up the ground rules first—once they leave the table, their food will be cleared. This will discourage the temptation to graze.

## Q. My one-year-old prefers to nurse instead of eating meals. Is this okay?

**Ages 1-3**

While it is perfectly fine to continue nursing beyond the first year of life, your child does need other nutrients beyond breast milk. And kids who want to drink instead of eat can have real difficulty gaining weight. So nursing should not replace eating solid meals.

Some parents enjoy nursing their toddler on demand 24/7. It may be done for snacking or soothing. That's fine if both members of the nursing team still desire it. However, frequent nursing can interfere with your toddler developing an appetite and desire for solid meals. Keep an eye on their weight and their eating habits. If you notice them slipping on the growth charts, it's time to set limits on nursing. Offer high-calorie, nutritious foods like avocados, eggs, meat, and whole milk yogurt, plus iron-rich foods like meats and fortified grains.

## Q. My child only eats beige food. Any ideas?

**Ages 1-2**

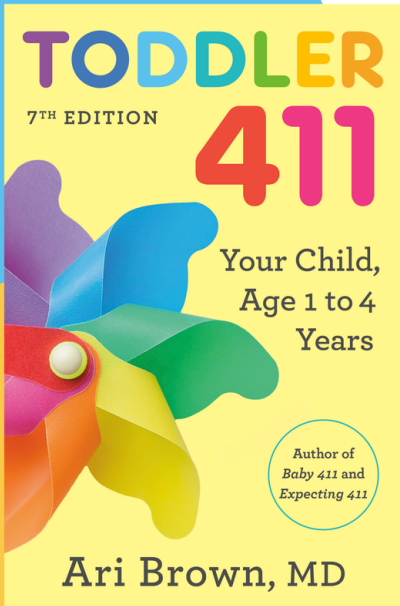
Beige food is usually the preferred food group for toddlers. It includes bread, cereal, french fries, and chicken nuggets. Yes, this too shall pass. But while you are waiting, here are some ideas for healthy foods that are the right color: whole grain pasta, brown rice, yogurt, hummus, tofu, bananas, pears, white bean spread, chicken salad, egg salad, cauliflower, almond butter, carrot/banana bread, and pumpkin butter. You can also begin sneaking purees of fruits and veggies into colorless food, such as yogurt. Start with a spoonful or two so the color changes gradually.

## Q. Can my child survive on chicken nuggets and cereal?

I know you think your child will never live to see kindergarten with their diet. But they all do. And most of the time, they eat what they need to. That's why most kids do not need to take multivitamins or supplements.



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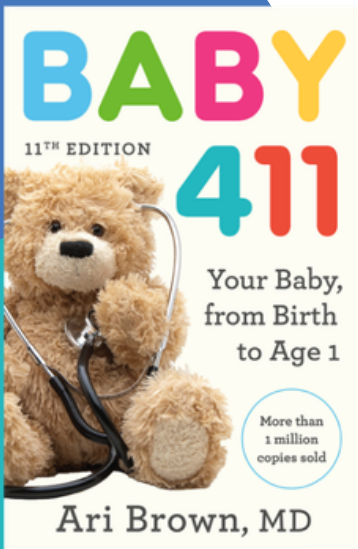
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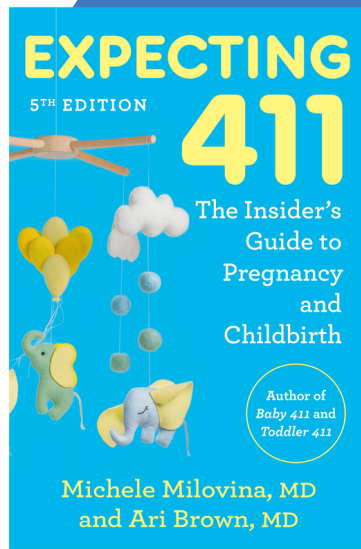
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