

# Ages 2-8 Feeding Recommendations

## PROVIDER TOOLKIT

Healthy  
Eating  
Research



# Welcome!

## Ages 2-8 Feeding Recommendations Toolkit for Providers

Childhood is a critical period for the development of eating behaviors and habits that last into adulthood. These habits play a vital role in growth, development, and overall health. It's not just what we feed our kids that matters, but also how we handle feeding or eating that's really important in establishing lifelong healthy eating habits for our kids. Healthy Eating Research's Recommendations for Creating Healthy Eating Habits for Kids 2-8 is a set of evidence-based best practices for how to feed children.

With your help, we can make sure that parents and caregivers have the most up-to-date information for establishing lifelong healthy habits for kids. Thank you for your support in spreading the word about tips for feeding kids ages 2-8.

In this toolkit, you will find an array of resources to learn more about these recommendations and share them with your colleagues, clients, and parents and caregivers you work with. These resources were developed based on feedback from parents, child care providers, and other early childhood professionals. If there are other materials or support you need to share the recommendations, let us know by contacting [healthyeating@duke.edu](mailto:healthyeating@duke.edu).

All of the materials in this toolkit can be found online at [healthyeatingresearch.org/tips-for-families/ages-2-8-feeding-recommendations/](https://healthyeatingresearch.org/tips-for-families/ages-2-8-feeding-recommendations/)

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# Creating Healthy Eating Habits for Kids 2-8

## Core Language

These recommendations were developed by a panel of experts in nutrition, pediatrics, psychology, family medicine, sociology, and child development; they focus on creating healthy eating habits for kids ages 2 to 8. This age range is a critical period for developing food preferences and establishing healthy eating habits that will last into adulthood. It is also a time when reluctance to eat new foods and other picky eating habits are common, which can be a big source of stress for parents.

The research-based recommendations show that autonomy, structure, and repetition are key to helping young children develop healthy eating habits.

- Supporting children's independence in learning to accept healthy foods makes a difference. Giving kids **autonomy** helps you to raise healthy, independent eaters.
  - A few action steps to support autonomy are to get kids involved in meal planning or prep and make mealtime fun! You can also find creative ways to talk to kids about food. Give foods fun names, share family recipes, or talk about your favorite meals or dishes.
- **Structuring** the environment to provide children with abundant opportunities to learn about and have positive experiences with healthy foods is important.
  - One of the most important tips here is to make sure healthy foods are available and accessible, and keep the sweet and salty foods out of sight (or not around at all)!
  - Routines are also important - regular meal and snack times will help kids know when it's time to eat.
- It takes time and **repetition** for kids to develop new healthy eating habits, including trying and tasting new foods. In fact, the researchers working on these recommendations determined that repeated exposure to new, healthy foods is the single most effective strategy to get kids to eat healthy food.
  - This can happen over weeks or months and through different preparations of the food. Kids may need to try something 10 to 15 times before knowing if they like it or not!

The expert panel developed more than 30 recommendations under these 3 categories to support the development of healthy eating behaviors in young children. These strategies are not meant to be “another thing to do” for already busy parents and caregivers. Rather, they are meant to make the experience of trying and eating healthy foods easier and make family mealtime an enjoyable experience while still respecting families' food budgets.

Visit HER's website for the complete recommendations and background evidence, alongside a suite of materials for parents and caregivers including tip sheets, graphics, videos, and answers to common feeding and eating challenges.

## Common Q&A

*Though not specifically for providers, these are answers to common questions we have gotten about the recommendations since their release. If you or your clients have additional questions about the recommendations, please reach out by contacting [healthyeating@duke.edu](mailto:healthyeating@duke.edu).*

### **These new recommendations are all about creating healthy eating habits for kids. What types of foods and drinks are considered to be healthy?**

When we talk about healthy eating, we are generally referring to recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which focus on eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy, and lean meats, beans, and legumes, like lentils or peas.

Young children need balance and variety. So, it's important to offer foods from all of the food groups, and variety within the food groups as well. It's also important to choose foods and drinks that are low in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium as these are important to limit. Too much can lead to oral health issues, excess weight gain and other related health problems.

### **Many parents call their kids picky eaters. Is it just the norm that most young kids are picky about food?**

Reluctance to eat new foods and other picky eating habits are common during toddlerhood and the preschool years. This can be a big source of stress for parents. We are always worrying about whether our kids are eating enough and growing appropriately. For most children this is relatively short-lived and tends to get better with age as children enter the school years. However, some children fall at the very extreme end of the picky eating spectrum; in this case, they will likely have a diagnosed medical condition called ARFID (Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder). This is different from the more typical picky eating we see in most toddlers and young children, and these individuals often need more intensive nutrition interventions due to slow growth or failure to thrive.

These recommendations are specifically for parents who are struggling with the more typical developmental eating challenges that tend to get better with age as children enter the school years. Children with an ARFID diagnosis should follow the advice and recommendations from their health care team.

### **There are a lot of different tips for families to try, which is great. But I don't have a lot of extra time. Where should I start? How do I approach this in a way that feels manageable?**

There are more than 30 recommendations and practical tips included in the report, so there is a lot to try! But, the recommendations are not intended to feel like "another thing to do" for already busy parents and caregivers. Rather, they are meant to serve as a "toolbox" of strategies to make the experience of trying and eating healthy foods easier and, ultimately, make family mealtime an enjoyable experience. We encourage parents and caregivers to start small. Start with one or two recommendations that you think might work best for your family and then take on more at a pace that works for you and your little ones.

Think of each strategy as an experiment; some will work great, while others may not be a good fit for you or your kids. That's okay! When this happens, don't be afraid to move on to a different strategy.

### **Every kid and every family are so different, so the tips that work for one might not work for another. How do we know what success looks like?**

There is no one way to define success. Rather, how you define success will depend on your child's starting point. Some kids might fight having any new foods on their plate, so getting them to hold, touch, or smell a new food might be a really important step to getting it on the plate. And both of these are super important steps to getting in that first taste. All of these wins should be celebrated. Like most things in parenting, this is a marathon, not a sprint. It's important to take the long view and keep the end goal in mind - we all want our kids to grow up to be healthy. So, don't give up, persistence is key.

## **Do you have tips for families that are dealing with limited budgets?**

We know that many U.S. families experience food insecurity, or lack reliable access to affordable healthy food in their communities, making it difficult to eat healthy. These big, systemic challenges make it difficult for parents and families living in these communities to make healthy choices. Additional resources, policies, and creative approaches like mobile markets, co-ops and community gardens are needed to ensure greater access to affordable, culturally appropriate, healthy foods and drinks for ALL people living in the United States. Until that happens, access to healthy food will continue to be a barrier for many families and communities.

While these upstream solutions are needed, we also know that many families operate on tight budgets and need tips today. Here are a few ideas that can help families save money and limit food waste:

- Use frozen vegetables when fresh vegetables are not available or when preparing a small amount for kids to try. This reduces food spoilage and waste by allowing small amounts to be offered to kids at any given meal or snack.
- Harness the power of positive role-modeling. If parents or caregivers try the food first, kids are more likely to try it themselves. This helps reduce the amount of food wasted.
- Shop seasonally. Fruits and vegetables are sold at a lower price when they are more available.
- Plan ahead. Plan meals for the week, make a grocery list, and stick to it! You'll be less likely to over-buy and have items go to waste.
- Stock up. Stock up on staple ingredients, like brown rice and whole wheat pasta, for a few favorite recipes.
- Stock whole grains. Stock up on dried beans and whole grains when they are on sale. They are generally less expensive and pack a nutritional punch.

We are continuing to work with stakeholders to develop more practical tips to help families use the recommendations while still respecting families' food budgets and time constraints.

## **What's the most important thing parents should keep in mind about this process of getting their kids to try (and hopefully like!) healthy food?**

First is persistence. Evidence supports that the single most effective thing for creating healthy eating habits is repeated exposure. It can take kids up to 15 tries to know if they really like a food or not.

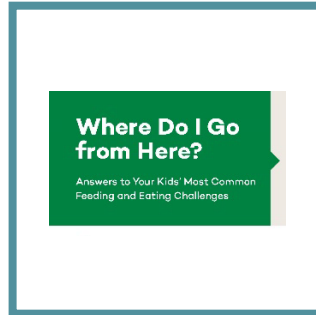
The second is patience. It will likely take some time to find the tips that work for your kids. But once you do, you will be helping to equip your kids with healthy habits they can use as they grow up and move into adulthood. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

# Library of Resources

You can find and download the following materials on [Healthy Eating Research's website](https://www.healthyeatingresearch.org/).



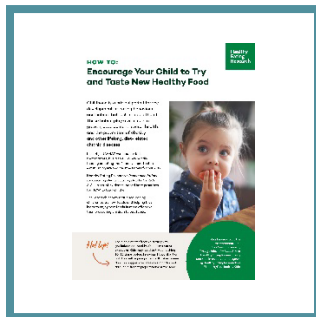
[Recommendations and Summary](#)



[Guidance for Common Challenges](#)



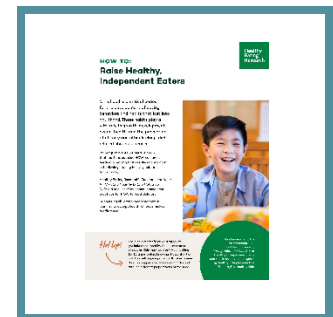
[Serving Size Guides](#)



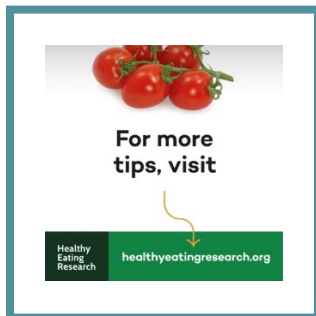
[Tip Sheet: Trying and Tasting New Food](#)



[Tip Sheet: Setting Up for Healthy Eating Success](#)



[Tip Sheet: Raising Healthy, Independent Eaters](#)

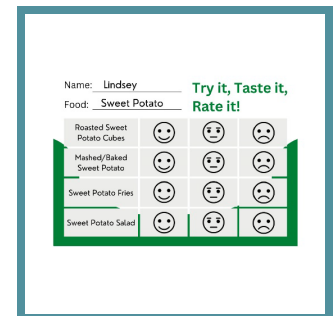


[Videos](#)



Resources in Spanish:

- [Tip Sheets](#)
- [Guidance for Common Challenges](#)
- [Serving Size Guides](#)
- [Classroom Taste Tally](#)
- [Classroom Repeated Exposure](#)



For Early Child Care Providers:

- [Tips for Providing Structure in the Class](#)
- [Classroom Taste Tally](#)
- [Classroom Repeated Exposure Chart](#)
- [Better Kid Care Module](#)