The Grandparent Guide: Making the Most of Mealtimes

by Sarah MacLaughlin and Kathy Kinsner

Grandparents play a major role in raising the next generation. While parents work, grandparents step in to help care for 24% of kids under 5 years old.

Figuring out how to make sure kids are eating the right things, in the right amounts, can be tough for new parents. As a grandparent, you’ve been there, but it’s natural to still have questions. Here’s our guide to most common dilemmas that come up around young children, feeding, and mealtimes.

You might be wondering...

“Should he be eating solid foods by now?”

Today, pediatricians advise only breastmilk and/or formula for the first 6 months.

How can you tell babies are ready for solid food? Experts say it’s when they can fully hold up their own heads, sit up by themselves, and seem interested in trying what you’re eating. Your grandchild’s health care provider will advise on what foods to start with and when to begin.
You might be wondering...

“You’re worried that she’s not eating enough.”

Here’s the rest of the story

Does your grandchild have the energy to explore, move, play, and learn? Chances are, she is probably getting enough nutrition. Talk to your son or daughter about whether they’d like you to track what your grandchild eats while in your care. If they have concerns, health care providers are happy to answer their questions.

“She’s a picky eater.”

This is another common worry among parents and grandparents. But many children take a long time to adjust to new foods. Check in with your grandchild’s parents about what foods they’d like their child to try. Then offer new foods—along with foods your grandchild does like—at each meal. Research shows that children need to be offered a new food 10–15 times before they will eat it. (Hint: they’re more likely to try foods they see you eating and enjoying!)

“You’re worried about wastefulness, start small. Keep in mind that toddlers’ stomachs are about as big as their fists—so they tend to eat a lot less than adults.”
You might be wondering...  

Here’s the rest of the story

Grandparents are famous for bending the rules—including providing treats when parents might say “no.” Here are a couple things to keep in mind:

- It’s a good idea to avoid using food as a reward or punishment.
- Substitute hugs, stories, playing together or other “treats” instead of snacks.
- Talk to your son or daughter about their views on sweets and try to keep your practices consistent. This is an important part of “sharing the care” of your grandchild.

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Mealtimes are a great time to connect with your grandkids and support their overall development. Turn off the TV, silence the cell phones, and make mealtimes screen-free for everyone. Sit together and take time to enjoy each other’s company—even before your grandchild is old enough to talk. These simple mealtime routines build strong family relationships and a healthy relationship with food. ZERO TO THREE has lots more resources on health and nutrition to read and share. And be sure to check out our other materials created especially for grandparents.