

Mealtime with Toddlers

You've worked hard all day and are looking forward to sitting down to supper. You're hungry and the food smells good. You sit with your toddler and begin eating. Your toddler, on the other hand, has other plans--such as making faces in the mashed potatoes, mashing peas, and talking LOUDLY with her mouth full. Suddenly, you aren't as hungry as you thought. In fact, you just want to get up and leave the table.

We want our children to grow up to be pleasant dinner company and most of us have visions of heart-warming family time shared around the table. We have a lot of expectations for children and this is good. However, we must take care that our expectations are appropriate. Usually, we are cautious about when we teach children certain skills. For example, we wouldn't dream of teaching them to potty until their bodies are ready--and neither should we be rigid about table manners until their bodies are able to perform those tasks. Most toddlers are just beginning to grasp motor skills. When your hands are small, it's hard to make the connection between the hand, the spoon, and the mouth. Toddlers are also in an exploratory stage. They want to play because this is how they learn. They want to see what happens when they squish their peas and make faces in their potatoes.

However, it can be stressful when all you want is a quiet mealtime with no mess. If you are craving this and find yourself repeatedly irritated with your child during

mealtimes, I encourage you to schedule some private time for you and another adult so that you can have adult quiet mealtimes occasionally. Have a relative or friend baby-sit for you or occasionally schedule your own mealtimes for after your toddler is down for the night. A break can be healthy for anyone.

Do schedule, however, regular time to eat with your children. This is a wonderful time of interaction and can be a lot of fun. To cut down on the mess:

- Put a plastic trash bag under your child's chair. It's a lot easier to throw away the bag than clean the floor!
- Be sure your child is using "child-size" utensils. Their little hands are not equipped to handle adult silverware.
- Give toddler-size portions, i.e. only a few bites at a time. Make sure the food is cut into manageable sizes for them.
- Work to see the big picture. Your child won't always make faces in the potatoes. This stage will pass...and it can be a fun one if we as adults slow down and accept it for what it is. The chance is good that one day you'll find yourself longing for faces in the potatoes and peas on the walls!