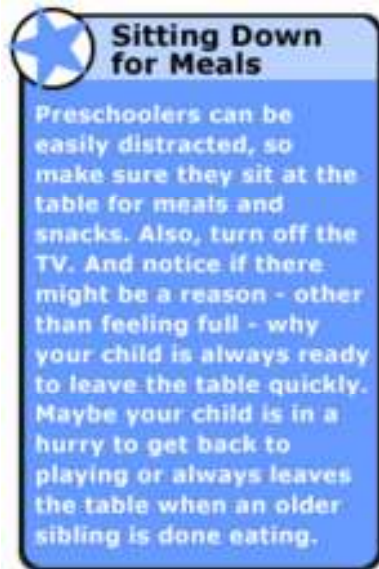


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## Hunger and Your Preschooler

Your preschooler eats lunch, then 20 minutes later claims to be hungry. Is it OK to offer a little something? Maybe yes, maybe no. Here's why:



Around the preschool years, many kids start to use the word "hungry" to express other feelings such as boredom, loneliness, sadness, or other emotions they don't understand or can't name. Using food to relieve sadness, for instance, will establish the connection between food and feelings other than hunger. Over time, that can be increasingly hard to undo. And it won't address the underlying reason for the sadness or another emotion, either.

If your child complains of hunger, take a minute to gently ask questions to see what's really going on: "What have you been doing?" or "Would you like me to come play with you for a while?" If your child quickly forgets about a snack, you'll know he or she was in search of your attention or just looking for

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something to do. If the hunger complaints continue, you probably have a hungry kid on your hands.

## **Talk About It**

It's wise for parents to talk to kids about what it means to be hungry and what it means to be full. Most of us are born with the ability to gauge our body's need for food, but over time we can learn to ignore these signals, which may contribute to weight gain.

Kids who truly understand when they're hungry — or full — can better regulate how much food to eat. Not surprisingly, kids who don't recognize when they're full are more likely to be overweight.

Here are some ways to encourage kids' awareness of when they're full:

- Don't use the "clean your plate" rule. Let your preschooler know that it's OK to stop eating if he or she feels full. This encourages kids to respond to their own hunger and fullness cues.
- If your child regularly leaves a lot of uneaten food, try serving smaller portions.
- Draw attention to how you eat more slowly as you become full. Pass on seconds if you're no longer hungry. Say, "This is delicious, but I'm going to stop because I'm full."

Remember that kids watch what others say and do. If parents and siblings all model healthy eating habits, a preschooler will have good examples to follow.

## **Preschoolers Who "Eat All Day"**

The average preschooler eats three meals a day plus two or three snacks. But given the chance, many would choose to snack all day long. Kids who "graze" like this might never feel hungry for a regular meal.

It's important to discourage grazing because:

- Kids who are hungry at mealtime might be more likely to try new foods and eat the healthy foods served.
  - Kids who graze are often snacking on higher calorie food and drinks, putting them at risk for excessive weight gain.
  - Kids who snack frequently, especially on sweets, are more likely to have dental problem
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likecavities.

A regular routine of meals and snacks helps discourage grazing, and kids like it because they know what to expect. For example, if kids start to feel hungry during story time, it helps when they also know that it's always snack time afterward. And a child who doesn't feel hungry when it's time for an afternoon snack knows it's OK to skip it because dinner is just around the corner.

On very active days, though, it's perfectly normal for kids to be extra-hungry and need more than usual to eat. On those days, be flexible if your child wants an extra snack or eats more at mealtime.

Reviewed by: Mary L. Gavin, MD

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