



William J. Mesibov MD, FAAP
Linda H. Jacobs MD, FAAP

Stuart J. Altman MD, FAAP
Marcia Rubinos MD, FAAP

Fellows American Academy of Pediatrics
575 Underhill Boulevard Syosset, New York 11791 516.921.2122 www.kidfixer.com

Appetite Slump in Toddlers

A child with a normal decline in appetite:

- Doesn't seem to eat enough, is never hungry, or won't eat unless you spoon feed her yourself.
- Is between 1 and 5 years old.
- Has an energy level that remains normal
- Grows normally.

Cause

Between 1 and 5 years of age most children normally gain only 4 or 5 pounds each year, even though they probably gained 15 pounds during their first year. Children in this age range can normally go 3 or 4 months without any weight gain at all. Because they are not growing so fast, they need fewer calories and they seem to have a poorer appetite (this is called physiological anorexia). How much a child chooses to eat is governed by the appetite center in the brain. Kids eat as much as they need for growth and energy. Many parents try to force their children to eat more than they need because they fear that poor appetite might cause poor health or a nutritional deficiency. This is not true; forced feedings interfere with the normal pleasure of eating and decrease a child's appetite.

Expected Course

Once you allow your child to be in charge of how much is eaten, the unpleasantness at mealtime and your concerns about her health should disappear in 1 to 2 months. Your child's appetite will improve when she becomes older and needs to eat more.

Helping a poor eater rediscover her appetite

- Put your child in charge of how much she eats. Trust her appetite center. The most common reason for some children never appearing hungry is that they have so many snacks and meals that they never become truly hungry.

Offer your child no more than two small snacks of nutritious food each day, and provide them only if your she requests them. If your child is thirsty between meals, offer water. Let your child miss one or two meals if she chooses and then watch her appetite return.

- Never feed your child if she is capable of feeding herself. The greatest tendency of parents of a child with a poor appetite is to pick up the spoon, fill it with food, smile, and try to trick the child into taking it. Once your child is old enough to use a spoon independently (usually 15 to 18 months), never again pick it up for her. If your child is hungry, she will feed herself. To this end, offer finger foods. Such foods allow your child to feed herself at least some of the time, even if she is not yet able to use a spoon.

- Limit milk to 16 ounces each day, and juice to 4 ounces. Milk and juice fill kids up and dull their appetites.

- Serve small portions of food - less than you think your child will eat. A child's appetite is decreased if she is served more food than she could possibly eat. If you serve your child a small amount on a large plate, she is more likely to finish it and gain a sense of accomplishment. If your child seems to want more, wait for her to ask for it. Avoid serving your child any foods that she strongly dislikes (such as some vegetables).

- Avoid conversation about eating. Don't discuss how little your child eats in her presence. Also, don't praise your child for eating a lot. Children should eat to please themselves.

- Don't extend mealtime. Don't make your child sit at the dinner table after the rest of the family is done eating. This will only cause your child to develop unpleasant associations with mealtime.



Scan this with your smart phone scanning app and you'll see the Kidfixer website.