



Photos by Diane Rodriguez

Executive Health Director Miranda Williams does the first load of washing and drying during the grand opening of the laundry facilities at the new Comfort Station in Siletz on April 18. The laundry is open Tuesday-Saturday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Angela Rabideau (white shirt) is the laundry manager.

Toddler development, nutrition may require new look at perception of behavior

By Nancy Ludwig, MS, RDN, LD, Head Start Consulting Nutritionist

Toddlers are trying to figure out their world. Sometimes we don't realize they are navigating textures and learning to chew. These challenges can be frustrating for them and can cause behaviors we might think are picky eating or trying to be difficult to get attention. I offer this information for families in my role as consultant nutritionist to Siletz Tribal Head Start. How can we best support our toddlers to grow and develop into healthy adults?

Since all behavior is communication, we might need to make the link with what may be going on with regard to development. We will have more influence with toddlers if we can connect with them vs. butting heads.

Beyond basic needs of love, safety, food, sleep, etc., toddlers also have specific developmental needs. It helps when we can appeal to the child's developmental needs to experiment and explore, feel capable, have choice, and to have a sense of control and power. Using this approach, we can allow toddlers to engage with their food and interact with it.

Often, we hear that toddlers are difficult and we just need to get through this stage. Rather than believing that toddler behaviors are difficult, perhaps we can interpret the behaviors differently. Let's look at some of the possible perceptions of behaviors and consider what is behind them:

- "My child is a picky eater." Recently during the Sixth Annual Conference on Transforming Toddlerhood hosted by Devon Kuntzman, PCC, I was struck by a quote by Amy Palanjian, "A lot of what is thrown into the bucket of 'picky eating' is just the kid figuring out their world."
- "My child can't sit still at the table." Toddlers have very short attention spans. It could be that their bodies really need to move. Meet children where they are with their short attention spans, especially if they are done eating. You may consider saying, "Food stays at the table, but your body may leave the table."
- "My child says they aren't hungry, but when they leave the table they often say they are hungry after a short time. This can't be true, so they must be trying to manipulate me." Sometimes children lose their appetite when the energy at a table is tense. After they leave the table, if they relax they are able get back in touch with their hunger cues. It may be important to consider whether this behavior is based on feelings present, rather than the food.
- "My child seems to be hungry all the time, except at dinner." Be aware that toddlers often front-load by eating more earlier in the day and they are not always hungry for dinner. Focus on making it pleasant to be at the table. Your child may have social needs that are more important than eating while at the table.
- "Use your words," is often what adults say to children when they are having a meltdown over food. If a child could use words, they would. Sometimes we need to help them by taking another approach to communicate. We might be able to help by stating what we "wonder," such as, "I wonder" if that is hard to chew? "I wonder" if your body needs to move before you come back to the table? This strategy prompts them by offering something close to what they may want to say, but aren't able to say.
- "My child refuses to eat certain foods." Sometimes children avoid specific foods because they are still navigating textures and are frustrated. Foods may need to be cut smaller.
- "Sometimes my child throws food. I just want them to eat it." Truly, a child should have a choice about whether they consume a food. You may want to give them a bowl or place to put foods they no longer want on their plates so they will not get so frustrated that they throw it.
- "My child is defiant." Your child is doing their best to communicate with you. Behavior is sometimes the only way they can express their frustration at what they cannot do. Avoid shaming. Engage in exploration rather than requiring consumption. Acknowledge their frustration to find what is driving the behavior. Don't fall

into the trap or believe they are choosing to be disrespectful, controlling, etc. Their brains are still developing and they don't yet have impulse control. The toddler brain is developing rapidly and we can't always see what they cannot do.

What tips or practices can we consider to make mealtimes pleasant with our toddlers?

- Start with small portions to reduce waste and overwhelming.
- See and accept where children are in their development.
- During meal time, engage in exploration and discovery by using questions like, "Can you find the biggest piece of broccoli on your plate?"
- Approach meal times as shared experiences. Sit together or be near each other.
- Talk with children about the day and activities, much like visiting with a friend.
- Children eat best when they are hungry. Even if they aren't hungry, there may be benefits and ways that a child can participate in the shared time together.
- Provide side dishes for a menu safety net. It matters to have foods that we want and a child might not like the main meal offering. If we also provide sides such as fruit, milk and cheese on the table, there is an option to fill their bellies before bedtime without the adult having to make more foods. This way allows everyone to find pleasure at the table.
- During dinner, you may want to ask for everyone's favorite meals. Make a list and add favorites to the rotation. Place the list on the refrigerator to show that your child's preferences matter.
- Engage children by offering choices within a range of what is possible, such as asking, "Do you want peas or carrots with dinner?" Older toddlers, 3- to 4-year-olds, can talk more about their food preferences. This also sets the stage for communicating what they want in the future.
- When offering new foods, take a long-term view. Choose a new food and let it appear over the course of the week. Don't feel pressure to expose new foods to kids too quickly.
- Remember that there is comfort in predictability.
- Give children opportunities to serve their own food. This empowers them choose their portion.
- Look at growth and developmental milestones, then "trust" your child's appetite.
- Remember the division of responsibility: The parent is responsible for the **what, when** and **where** of feeding. The child is responsible for **how much** and **whether** to eat.

To summarize, let's remember that all behavior is communication. Don't get thrown off by your child's behaviors. Remember that behaviors are signals of what children are experiencing inside of their body and brain.

There is always something behind an emotional outburst. With a toddler, it is likely to be developmental and we might be asking them to do something they cannot do.

Stop, observe and consider what might be causing frustration. Connect with the child by acknowledging what you see and then lightly state what you wonder.

Exploration and discovery are more important than how much they eat. Make meal time a place of social connection. To eat well, children need to feel safe and be provided with foods they are able to eat.

If you believe there is a serious problem with a child's ability to eat, an evaluation with a speech language pathologist (SLP) or occupational therapist (OT) may help.

Siletz Tribal Head Start offers nutritional support at no cost to Head Start families. If you have nutrition concerns about your Head Start child or want to discuss family nutrition concerns, please contact your teacher or the director and ask for a phone call with the nutritionist.

Resources

- Amy Palanjian, <https://www.yummytoddlerfood.com/>
- Kary Rappaport, OT, <https://solidstarts.com/category/toddlers/>
- Ellyn Satter, author of *Child of Mine – Feeding with Love and Good Sense* and *How to Get Your Kid to Eat ...But Not Too Much*