

Ten Ways to Help Your Child Eat Neat

By Terri Mauro, About.com Guide

Whether due to low muscle tone, poor motor control, or impulsiveness, some children with special needs may have trouble getting the food into their mouths and not all over everything else. Here are 10 ways to help your child be a neater eater.

1. Supersize that bib.

Teeny tiny bibs may be good for teeny tiny babes, but bigger kids need bibs with a lot more coverage. Try cutting a hole in the middle of a beach towel or small sheet and putting it over your child's head for total body coverage. Then stress less when your child wipes his face on his shoulder or dumps her peas in her lap.

2. Strip for action.

Another alternative to a standard bib, at least for boys in warmer climates, is to take off that nice stainable shirt and let him dine bare-chested. Skin's a whole lot easier to wipe up than fabric. If you don't want topless girls at the table, stripping down to an undershirt will at least keep any food stains hidden under clothes.

3. Get useful utensils.

Many [occupational therapy catalogs](#)¹ sell specialized forks and spoons with wider grips and slanted scoops to make it easier for people with fine-motor problems to get the food to their mouths. Experiment with some and see what works best with your child. You might also see if a lighter utensil, like a plastic spoon or fork, is easier for your little one to wield than a heavier metal implement.

4. Pass on the plate.

Sometimes it's easier to keep food on a fork if you have something to push it up against. Some of us use potatoes for that function, or a knife; but a child with motor-planning issues may just scoot that food right off the side of the plate, or use a hand to make the vittles stay put. As you did with utensils, experiment with different types of plates -- [occupational therapy catalogs](#)² have some with curved portions for this purpose -- or see if a bowl works better for your child than that flat expanse of plate.

5. Think finger food.

So it drives you crazy when your child eats with his hands. But what about hot dogs? Fried chicken? Fish sticks? Corn on the cob? Some things are meant to be eaten by hand, and it's a mercy toward your child to include some of those in as many meals as possible. Especially for school lunches, you may want to pack a lunch of sandwiches and cheese sticks and raw veggies and pudding tubes to save your child the trouble of displaying his poor utensil skills over a hot cafeteria meal.

6. No heaping helpings.

If your child has a good appetite, or needs to pack on some pounds, it may be tempting to load up that dinner plate with as much food as he or she can handle. But remember there's such a thing as seconds. A packed plate is a mess waiting to happen, as your child spills or drops or digs in with fingers instead of fork. Giving your child a neat and manageable amount, and then replenishing as needed, can go a long way to helping your child consume less conspicuously.

7. Give dish time-outs.

If your child is losing control of good eating habits and threatening to splash the contents of his plate all over himself and everybody, take that dish away and give it a "time-out." Place it where your child can't reach for a short period of time, or until your child is calmed down. Then give it back and proceed with eating. You may find this works a lot better than yelling at your child to stop what he's doing, stop that, stop that, STOP!

8. Be generous with napkins.

A messy eater can go through a paper napkin in no time. Since you don't want her to keep wiping up with that food-covered thing, or transfer her wiping to the tablecloth or sleeve, make sure plenty of napkins are available. At restaurants, ask the server to bring extra napkins as soon as the food is served, so you'll be ready for wipe-ups and wipe-outs.

9. Serve up a bribe.

Is there something your child is powerfully interested in having that you don't much care if he gets or not? In our family, it was sugary juice-drink pouches for my son's lunch. I'd just as soon give him something with some actual nutritional value, in a less squeeze-risky package, but for quite a while we got good mealtime neatness out of an offer of a juice pouch in next day's lunch bag in return for dinnertime decorum.

10. Allow early dismissal.

If your child eats a respectable amount and wants to leave, say, "So long." Making a messy eater stay at the table past the point at which interest and control has waned is asking for food to become fingerprint and glasses to get tipped. Some kids may even benefit from taking a break from the table and coming back with renewed focus. Parents will benefit from a nagging break, too.

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