
Maureen M. Black

Toddlerhood, the period from 12 to 36 months, represents striking changes in children's development. Along with mastery of skills such as walking, talking, self-feeding, sleeping through the night, and bowel and bladder control, toddlers strive for autonomy. Toddlers’ increasing autonomy impacts their feeding behavior and may increase or restrict their food exposures. Food preferences formed during toddlerhood often persist into adulthood, making toddlerhood an ideal time to increase children's dietary diversity [1]. Toddlers benefit from parenting that is responsive, while ensuring that their introduction to the family meal includes exposure not only to nutrient-rich food, but also to healthy mealtime behaviors.

Perspectives from Child Development

Child development is cumulative and dynamic during toddlerhood, building on skills acquired during infancy. Gross motor advances (crawling, walking, running, and climbing) enable toddlers to explore their physical environment as they engage in goal-directed behavior. Fine motor advances enable toddlers to pick up small objects, manipulate eating utensils, and self-feed. Oral motor and language developments enable toddlers to chew complex foods, to express themselves and communicate, and to negotiate. With enhanced cognition, toddlers can solve problems, recall the location of hidden objects, and play simple games. Toddler’s social development includes prosocial skills, such as empathy and recognition of others’ emotions, and self-regulation, such as controlling their thoughts or behavior in response to specific contexts and situations. These emerging skills bring increasing autonomy, often accompanied by impulsivity to satisfy their desires immediately. When combined with toddlers’ changing nutritional needs, their increasing autonomy can present challenges to caregivers, especially during meals.
Perspectives from Nutrition

The World Health Organization recommends that children are exclusively breastfed until approximately 6 months of age and then transition to complementary feeding, defined as the period when breast milk alone is no longer sufficient to meet infants' nutritional requirements. Guidelines for complementary feeding have focused primarily on toddlers' nutrient requirements and advances in flavor and texture as their diet expands and begins to approximate the family diet.

Toddlers' feeding behavior also changes. Baby-led weaning, sometimes referred to as baby-led eating, occurs in the context of complementary feeding. Children choose when and what food they will eat (from a choice of healthy options), the rhythm of the meal, and the amount of food that they will eat, while primarily feeding themselves [2]. Baby-led weaning is based on presumptions that young children have the motor skills to self-feed along with the regulatory skills to signal hunger and satiety. Two recent reviews [3, 4] found that baby-led weaning typically occurs in the context of the family meal, with the child consuming food that is softened and cut into bite sizes. Evidence on the nutrient intake and long-term impact of baby-led feeding on children's nutrient intake and eating patterns is emerging.

Food neophobia, defined as refusal or fear to eat unfamiliar foods, is a normal developmental phase during toddlerhood. Food neophobia differs from selectivity or pickiness, defined as specific food preferences and dislikes regardless of familiarity. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of neophobia and picky eating emphasized the relevance of considering the social context and bidirectional parent-toddler aspects of feeding, including factors at the cell, child, parent, and household levels [5].

Toddlerhood is a transitional period that can be both joyful and challenging, as children acquire new skills and assert their autonomy. Effective parenting practices include providing healthy food, age-appropriate settings and opportunities for toddlers to eat, reading toddler's signals, and responding promptly, appropriately, and with nurturance [6]. This pattern is known as responsive parenting, or responsive feeding when applied to mealtimes. Responsive parenting ensures that toddlers receive the guidance and nurturant care that is needed to develop healthy feeding behavior and emotional well-being.
References