Getting off to a good start

Food habits begin at an early age and have lifelong implications. Good nutrition is essential for physical and emotional growth. A poorly nourished child may be restless, irritable, or more withdrawn than a well-nourished child. Limited food choices may prevent a child from having the nutrients or energy needed to promote growth and development in mental, social, and physical activities.

Adults are role models

Children are most likely to learn healthy eating habits when parents, caregivers, and other influential adults eat a nutritious diet themselves. Adult role models are the single most important influence on what a child learns to eat. Toddlers especially, watch others closely and are great imitators. They develop good food habits if a variety of nutritious foods are offered in a pleasant, relaxed setting.

Our children are at risk

- One in four of 2- to 5-year-olds is at risk of being overweight.
- Overweight children are 43.5 times more likely to have at least three cardiovascular risk factors.
- One in three American children born in 2000 will become diabetic unless food consumption is reduced and exercise is increased.
- Preschoolers’ food consumption is increasing; between 1977 and 2004 their calorie consumption increased 300 calories per day.
- Preschoolers are getting too much sugar and juice and not enough fruits and vegetables. This means that 2- to 6-year-olds should consume no more than 3/4 cup juice as part of their 1 1/2 cup daily intake of fruit. Fruit juice should be 100% fruit juice, not drinks or punches.
- African-American and Mexican-American children are at greater risk of nutrition-related health problems.

Restrictive diets — including low fat and low carb — are inappropriate for the young child. Children need fat, carbohydrate, and adequate calories to support normal growth and development.
Create a positive atmosphere

Family mealtime is more than nourishment. A pleasant mealtime atmosphere also encourages the development of children’s self-esteem and independence, as well as their motor, social, and language skills. Children practice their motor skills as they spoon foods from serving dishes to their plates and as they pass food dishes to others. They observe and practice social and language skills through family conversation during the meal. Besides demonstrating good eating habits and proper table manners, other family members can use mealtime to share stories about their daily activities. A comfortable and relaxing atmosphere promotes physical and emotional growth for the whole family.

A toddler’s eating schedule may not always follow an adult’s schedule but including the toddler at the family meal encourages a life-long habit of meal sharing. On days when a child is tired or cranky, or too hungry to wait for mealtime, it may be best to feed the child early. Provide a separate meal or a small nutritious snack, such as a whole wheat cracker or piece of fruit, until the meal is ready. A short walk, game of tag, or swinging with the child while the meal is being prepared is an excellent way to pass the time and demonstrate being physically active.

Common Eating Patterns

These descriptions illustrate how a child’s normal changes and growth patterns affect eating habits. These swings in behavior and growth rate can explain many of the difficulties parents experience during development of a child’s eating patterns.

1 to 2 years

- Appetite drops as growth slows
- Learns to drink from cup, usually is weaned
- May cut back to about 2 cups of milk daily
- Learns to bring food to mouth with spoon
- Likes to feed self but will likely need some help
- Copies others and will eat many family foods
- Cutting teeth and may have difficulty chewing
- Has acute taste buds and can detect slight differences in foods
- Develops likes and dislikes; likes sweet foods
- Likes to touch and play with food; responds to food texture
- Learns to say “No” and becomes more independent

2 to 3 years

- Has much improved muscle control; can use spoon and fork easily
- Often desires and requests desserts and sweets
- Will wait a little for requests to be filled
- Usually will eat raw vegetables but may refuse salads
- Finds green vegetables more acceptable
- Can make simple either/or food choices: “Would you like a peach or pear?”

4 to 5 years

- May develop food jags characterized by refusing to eat all but a handful of foods
- Influenced by others: other children, television ads, teachers, etc.
- Likes plain cooking and foods separated on the plate
- Dislikes most mixed food dishes and gravies
- By age 5, often has fewer demands and will accept food available
- Appetite is gradually increasing
The power of advertising

Children are strongly influenced by what they see and hear. Parents compete with 10,000 food commercials and $13 billion in advertising directed specifically toward children annually.

Making healthy choices when eating out and using convenience food is challenging. Fast-food meals and convenience foods tend to provide more calories, fat, carbohydrate, added sugars, sugar-sweetened beverages, and less fiber, milk, fruits and non-starchy vegetables than other meal choices.

Parents and daycare providers need to take the opportunity to be role models for good nutrition by providing a wide variety of nutritious food in appropriate amounts.

Building a strong partnership between providers and parents will help ensure that children's food needs are met and that a good foundation of food habits and physical activity are established.

Sample Menus for Toddlers and Preschoolers*

(4 eating episodes per day)

Morning:
Fruit Group  Banana, 1/2 medium
Bread Group  Ready-to-eat cereal flakes, 1 ounce
Bread Group  Toast, 1 slice
Milk Group  Milk, 1 cup
Fats and Sweets  Margarine and jam

Lunch:
Meats and Breads  Peanut butter sandwich
Vegetable Group  Grated carrots with raisins, 1/2 cup
Fruit Group  1 medium orange
Milk Group  Milk, 1 cup
Fats and Sweets  Jelly (on sandwich)

Mid-afternoon:
Vegetable Group  Green/red pepper strips with dip
Bread Group  Whole wheat crackers (4)
Beverage  Water or fruit juice**

Supper:
Meat Group  Chicken leg
Bread Group  Rice (1/2 cup)
Vegetable Group  Broccoli, 1 stalk
Milk Group  Milk, 1 cup
Fruit Group  Peach slices
Fats and Sweets  Tapioca pudding

(5 eating episodes per day)

Breakfast:
Fruit Group  Orange juice, 1/2 cup
Meat Group  1 egg (scrambled)
Bread Group  Toast, 1 slice
Fats and Sweets  Margarine
Milk Group  Milk, 1 cup

Mid-morning:
Bread Group  Graham cracker, 2 squares
Milk Group  Milk or flavored yogurt, 1 cup

Noon:
Meat Group  Ground beef balls with tomato and macaroni, 3/4 cup
Bread Group  Peas, 1/2 cup
Vegetable Group  Pear, 1/2 sliced
Milk Group  Milk, 1 cup

Mid-afternoon:
Meat Group  Peanut butter, 2 tablespoons
Bread Group  Toast
Fruit Group  Banana slices
Beverage  Water

Supper:
Meat Group  Baked fish, 2 ounces
Vegetable Group  Potato, 1 medium
Bread Group  Cornbread, 1 small piece
Fats and Sweets  Margarine
Fruit Group  Apple, 1/2 sliced
Beverage  Water

* Portions are appropriate for 4- to 6-year-olds. Offer 2- to 3-year-olds 1/2 to 3/4 as much.
** Fruit juice is part of daily fruit intake; choose 100% fruit juice, not fruit drink or punch.
15 tips for surviving the toddler rollercoaster

A toddler’s emotional and physical growth, as well as eating habits, change dramatically between 1 and 5 years of age. Behaviors tend to swing about every 6 months and can range from balanced to difficult.

1. Children prefer fairly dependable daily routines, including meal and snack times.

2. Children have small stomachs and often need to eat more than three times a day. For healthy snack ideas to offer midway between meals, see “Snacks for Healthy Kids” (PM 1264).

3. Save highly sugared foods, soda, fruit-flavored drinks, and candies for occasional “special treat” snacks.

4. Serve kid-size portions. One tablespoon of food per year of age between 2 and 4 years is usually enough.

5. Giving children their own special plates and bowls plus smaller utensils helps control portion sizes. Plates with edges also help the child scoop up his or her food.

6. Food jags are normal. When children are given choices from each food group every day, they learn how to include a variety of foods in their daily intake. Allowing children to serve themselves also promotes eating in amounts according to hunger, rather than expecting them to finish a pre-determined amount.

7. Limit the number of food choices offered at any one time. Plan meals to include one food that the child likes and continue to offer new foods from each of the food groups.

8. Milk and fruit juice are healthy choices but should not be offered in unlimited quantities. When toddlers eat or drink too much of only a few foods, they may miss the nutrients they need from other foods. Toddlers need 16 to 24 ounces (2 to 3 cups) of milk per day.

9. Cut foods into bite-sized pieces, preferably before the child is at the table. Children are unable to handle cutting with a fork or knife, and will likely have a tantrum if they are not allowed to try.

10. Colorful foods arranged in unusual shapes and designs appeal to children.

11. Children are often sensitive to food temperature and texture. Most do not like very hot or very cold foods; many dislike lumpy or stringy foods.

12. Children prefer moist rather than dry meats. Store ready-to-cook ground beef patties in the freezer to serve when less “child-friendly” meats are served to the rest of the family.

13. Avoid overcooking vegetables. Many children prefer raw vegetables. Wash raw fruits and vegetables well before serving and offer to appropriate age levels to avoid choking hazards.

14. Children under school age can choke easily on some foods, including nuts, popcorn, pits or seeds from fruit, and pieces of raw vegetables. Round, firm foods tend to be the greatest risk for choking.

15. “Force-feeding” a child by coaxing, cajoling, or giving rewards is seldom successful. Children can learn at a very early age to control their parents by refusing to eat. If your child dawdles over a meal longer than 30 minutes, remove the plate without comment and limit or omit snacks before the next meal. Do not call attention to your action or act as if you are punishing the child.

Check these Resources

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Nutrition and Wellness

www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/child-nutrition-families

Other titles available from the Extension Online Store (store.extension.iastate.edu):

- Guide to Healthy Kids: What Parents Can Do (NCR 374)
- Healthy Hearts: How to Monitor Fat and Cholesterol (PM 1967)
- Non-food Alternatives for School Rewards and Fundraising (PM 2039a)
- Overweight Kids: What Communities Can Do (PM 1884)
- Say ‘YES’ to Family Meals (PM 1842)
- Snacks for Healthy Kids (PM 1264)
- Steps to a Healthier Family (PM 2005)
- What Schools Can Do to Promote Healthy Eating (PM 2039)
- What’s for Lunch? It’s In the Bag (PM 3026)

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