

Healthy Eating for Young Children

by Bobbie Rose

Eating is one of the most basic human activities. Yes, we need to eat and drink to survive, but eating is so much more. What and how we eat reflects our values, our priorities, our culture, and our heritage. Sharing a meal with others fosters community and belonging, supports emotional health, and strengthens relationships. When we feed young children we nurture physical growth and development, but we also send a message of love and caring. Healthy eating for young children lays the foundation for healthy bodies, healthy relationships, and strong connections to the community.



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for building strong muscles, organs, and bones. Children who eat healthy food enjoy healthy smiles, skin, and digestion.

Healthy Weight for Children

The convenience and availability of fast foods and processed foods has influenced the way many families feed their children.

Packaged foods have chemical additives, added sugar and extra salt, and provide less nutrition to growing children. 'Big box' stores and super-sized portions have ushered in an era of obesity. The past few decades have seen steady increases in the weight of Americans. The good news is that for young children (ages 2-5) the rates of obesity are starting to go down (Centers for Disease Control, 2014). It's important we continue this trend, since overweight and obese children often become overweight adolescents and adults. In turn, they may have increased risks for diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, heart disease, and cancer.

The Importance of Healthy Eating for Growth and Development

Children need nutritious food to fuel the rapid growth of their bodies and brains. Healthy food contains minerals such as calcium and iron; vitamins such as A, C, D, E, K, and the B vitamins; carbohydrates needed for energy; and protein



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How Can Early Care and Education Make a Difference?

ECE programs can support children and families by getting back to the basics of preparing and serving 'home cooked' meals with simple, healthful ingredients. Rather than relying on processed and convenience foods, ECE staff can help

children develop a preference for foods that are high in nutrition. Seasonal food that is locally grown is often more affordable and more delicious. Food does not have to be fancy for children to eat it. In fact, children usually prefer simple food. It's time to slow down and bring awareness to how and what we feed children.

Off to a Good Start: Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is the most natural way to feed babies. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2012) recommends that mothers breastfeed exclusively for the first 6 months of an infant's life and then continue to breastfeed while the infant learns to eat table foods to 12 months. Once an infant turns 12 months, moms can continue to breastfeed for as long both mom and baby desire.

Often moms give up breastfeeding when they return to work or school. Your program can reinforce the importance of breastfeeding by doing everything possible to support moms who want to keep breastfeeding:

- Start by putting 'breastfeeding friendly' policies in writing.
- Educate staff in the skills to support breastfeeding, such as how to properly label and store breast milk.
- Provide a special space with a comfortable chair for moms to breastfeed their babies.
- And make sure to support your breastfeeding staff members, too!

Beverages

Drinks are an important nutritional consideration for young children:

- Serve whole milk (or 2% milk for children at risk for obesity) to children between the ages of one year and two years.
- Switch to 1% or skim milk when a child turns two years old (AAP, APHA, NRC, 2011).
- Offer no more than one serving of 100% fruit juice per day. A serving size is four to six ounces (AAP, 2001).
- Sweetened beverages should not be offered to children in ECE programs. Instead, make sure that thirsty children, six months and older, have access to water at snacks, meals, and in between.

Choose Variety

Offering a variety of food provides a broad range of nutrients. Although children will naturally have food preferences, it is important to offer new foods. A child may need to see, smell, and touch a new food 10 times before eating it; this is normal. Keep in mind that it is only after being exposed to new foods that children will actually try *new foods*.

Menus with a three-week cycle offer more opportunities to serve different foods.

- **Start with seasonal fruits and vegetables.** Choose fruits and vegetables with a range of colors including green, yellow, orange, and red. You have probably noticed that fruits and vegetables in season are fresher and tastier, so plan your meals around seasonal fruits and vegetables to save money and provide a higher quality of produce.
- **Frozen fruits and vegetables are a good choice in winter or off-season** because they retain their nutrients. Use the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA) MyPlate resources to plan meals for children (USDA, 2011).
- **Keep in mind that some healthy foods, such as whole grapes, carrot rounds, and nuts are choking hazards** for young children, so be sure to grate, chop, or shred these kind of foods.

Nuts and Nut Allergies

The initial introduction of foods with high rates of allergy, like peanuts, should take place at home rather than in an ECE program (Fleischer, 2013). Parents should get advice about introducing new foods from their health care providers. Talk to parents about the foods their children have tried and their food preferences.

Food allergies are serious and can be life threatening. If you have children with peanut allergies in your program, you may need to adopt a 'peanut-free' policy and be prepared to administer Epi-pen® in an emergency. You will also need an individual allergy action plan for each child with a food allergy.

Generally, nuts are a healthy source of protein and fat, so if children in your program have tried peanuts at home and don't have allergies, it should be okay to serve peanuts or peanut butter. To prevent choking in young children, nuts need to be served ground up or as nut butter.

Limit Processed Foods and Read Nutrition Labels

Processed foods are often low in nutrition and contain sweeteners, salt, food additives, and chemicals to make them more appealing to the consumer. It is best to stick to whole grains, fruits, vegetables, meats, fish, and legumes. Another way to limit heavily processed, sugary, and salty foods is to check nutrition labels. Read the nutrition label before purchasing packaged or canned foods. Products with a shorter list of ingredients tend to be a better choice.

The Feeding Relationship

When a child has had enough to eat, his body gives cues to stop. When children pay attention to the signs of satiety or 'feeling full,' they won't overeat. If children learn to ignore or override these cues, it can lead to becoming overweight. It is important to respect when children say they feel full. Practices such as insisting that children 'clean their plate' or finish everything before getting dessert can lead to overeating.



Photo by Bonnie Neugebauer

The best way to make sure that children know when to stop eating when they feel full is to establish a 'division of responsibility.' With a healthy division of responsibility, the adult decides *what* food to prepare and provides meals and snacks on a regular schedule. Then, the child decides *how much or whether* to eat (Satter, 2015). Do not pressure children to eat; instead, offer gentle encouragement to try new foods. Sometimes a child will not be hungry at all. Other times, like during a growth spurt, a child may eat as much as an adult. Either way, children should be in control of how much to eat.

Family-Style Eating

Every culture around the world has traditions for sharing meals. Family-style eating allows children and adults to enjoy sharing a meal together. In family-style eating, children sit at the table with their teachers. Food is passed and children help themselves to a portion. Conversations about the food and the day's activities take place. There's laughter and there are opportunities to discuss feelings and ask questions. Teachers play an important part in role modeling table manners, polite conversation, and sharing and trying new foods. With family-style eating, children grow in their ability to try and share new food as they socialize and practice table manners.

Get Children Involved!

Children are naturals at cooking, gardening, and composting. Help them learn:

- where food comes from.
- how plants grow from seeds.
- how fruit is harvested from trees, vines, and bushes.
- how food scraps decompose to make soil where new vegetable plants can grow.

Provide opportunities for children to prepare food. From a very young age, children can learn to sort, shred, mix, chop, mash, and pour to prepare snacks and meals. Cooking activities build foundations for math, science, and literacy. For example, when making a smoothie you can introduce the names of different kinds of berries and then count them. You can discuss the berries' different colors, how they grow, and how they are picked. Children can measure and mix and finally, they can enjoy a delicious and nutritious snack together.



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Healthy Celebrations

Celebrations can be healthy! Focus on games, songs, and activities. Serve foods that are special, but still healthy. Make sure that parents are aware of your policies for celebrations. Prepare a list of ideas for foods and activities to celebrate birthdays and other special occasions.

Environmental Concerns: Locally Sourced and Sustainable

Many families with young children are concerned about environmental issues and climate change. Join the conversation by talking about farming, packaging, recycling, waste disposal, and composting. Our times call on us to address how we use energy and natural resources. While it may not be appropriate to worry children about complicated political and economic issues, we can teach respect for our food and our resources.

Access to Healthy Food

Listed are some ways you can improve access to healthy food:

- **Participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).** CACFP pays for eligible meals and snacks served in child care programs. By joining the program you will have access to menus, resources, and ongoing support for healthy eating.
- **Take a field trip to your local farmer's market,** or invite a local farmer to visit your school to talk to your children about farming.

- **Start a garden;** you may be able to write a grant to fund a gardening program.
- **Look into farm produce delivery;** some farming communities will deliver a box of fresh, seasonal produce right to your doorstep.
- **'Shop the edges' of your supermarket;** fresh and refrigerated foods tend to be along the walls of stores, while processed and packaged foods are usually in the center aisles.
- **Organize a 'cooking party'** to prepare healthy food with the families in your program.
- **Create an atmosphere of sharing ideas and resources** in your program through bulletin boards, newsletters, and social media.

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