

Feeding Young Children

Kathryn S. Keim and Marilyn A. Swanson

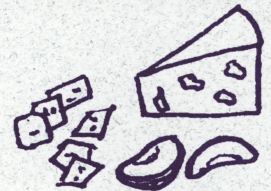
Nutrition and healthy eating habits are vital for young children. Many of the food habits your child learns during early childhood will last for a lifetime.

The following statement can help parents and care givers understand the division of responsibility between them and children: Parents and care givers should decide what food their children are offered and where and when it is presented. Children should decide how much to eat.

Children do not know the nutrient level of the food they eat. The parent and care giver offers nutritious food at appropriate times. Children's internal hunger mechanisms will tell them when they are hungry or not hungry. Parents and care givers should not force or urge their children to eat a specified amount of food.

The child chooses to eat or not to eat the nutritious food when offered.

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Characteristics of toddlers and preschool children

Preschoolers are ever changing and unpredictable.

You can depend on them to be themselves, to be independent, to vary from day to day, and to want to learn by doing. No two children are alike.

A child's tastes differ from day to day.

What was a favorite food yesterday may be on the reject list today.

Children enjoy helping prepare what they eat.

Even by opening a carton, children feel they have contributed to the meal and are more likely to eat what they have helped to prepare.

Preschoolers eat more slowly than adults.

Let children set the eating pace.

Different foods take different lengths of time to eat. Remember to consider the extra time children need. Children do not have an adult's sense of time.

Encourage children to serve and feed themselves.

Hand-eye coordination improves when children feed themselves. They become

more competent in the skills needed to feed themselves. This makes them increasingly independent. They will want to pour their own milk or juice and serve their own food. Make this possible by providing small pitchers for pouring and child-sized utensils for serving. Let them practice these skills. Less food is wasted when children serve themselves.

Let children know they are welcome even if they spill.

When children are learning to pour or serve food, they spill. As children gain control of muscles and nerves and as they practice serving, their awkwardness will decrease and accidents will be less frequent. Don't punish children for spilling. Help them learn to clean up spills instead.

Children enjoy eating meals with adults.

Pleasant conversation can be modeled by adults. This creates feelings of security and pleasure and makes food more acceptable. When other children and adults enjoy eating, young children want to "join the crowd."

About the Authors

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As children gain control of muscles and nerves, accidents will be less frequent. Don't punish children for spilling. Help them learn to clean up spills instead.

To encourage eating at snacks and meals, try to: Make mealtime and snack time pleasant and served at regular times, and



Schedule snacking so that it is not too close to mealtime.

Serve meals regularly.

A child's frustration level increases if made to wait for food. If they know a snack or meal is scheduled and it happens, their frustration level is lower.

Use child-sized utensils.

Broad-based cups with large handles are easier for small hands to hold. Small glasses, half full, also help. Plates with rims help children push food onto their forks and spoons. Also, child-sized forks and spoons make it more enjoyable for children to feed themselves.

Encourage children to work together at mealtime.

Mealtime is a wonderful opportunity for children to learn cooperation and how to work together. It is also a good time to learn skills that show respect for others.

Encourage children to ask each other to pass a dish, rather than reaching for it. Using the words "please" and "thank you" can make mealtime a social time. Also, if children have to leave the table, they can learn to ask to be excused.

Have the children help clean up after eating. They can assist by taking their plates to the dishwashing area, or give them small buckets and cloths to wipe the table.

Allow enough personal space for each child at the meal.

Children need plenty of space to balance food, drink, and child-sized eating utensils. Your child's feet should rest on a floor, chair, or step, not dangle in midair. Comfort and safety is as important for youngsters as it is for adults.

Tips on types and quantities of foods

Keep in mind the following points when preparing and serving food for children:

Children like mild flavored foods.

Children have keener senses of taste and smell than adults. Mildness is especially important when considering vegetables and fruits.

Children like crisp foods in a meal.

They like to hear the crunching of the crisp cracker or toast and feel crisp textures in their mouth.

Children prefer the familiar.

Children want familiarity and routine in their foods. In fact, the more often a new food is served, the more likely the child will eat the food.

Children in general prefer unmixed foods.

Young children like food served as separate foods. For example, instead of a casserole of ground beef, peas, and macaroni, children may prefer a ground beef patty, peas, with macaroni on the side.

Fingers are a child's first feeding utensil.

Permit your children to pick up "finger foods." Partially-cooked vegetables, fruits, strips of meat, and quarters of hard-cooked eggs are great finger foods. Young hands need the practice.

Stiff or even slightly gummy textures in starchy foods are especially disliked by children.

Mashed potatoes can be either popular or highly unpopular, depending solely on the moisture content and smoothness. As a rule, children do not eat dry foods easily.

Do not force a child to eat.

Offer nutritious food again at the next scheduled meal or snack.

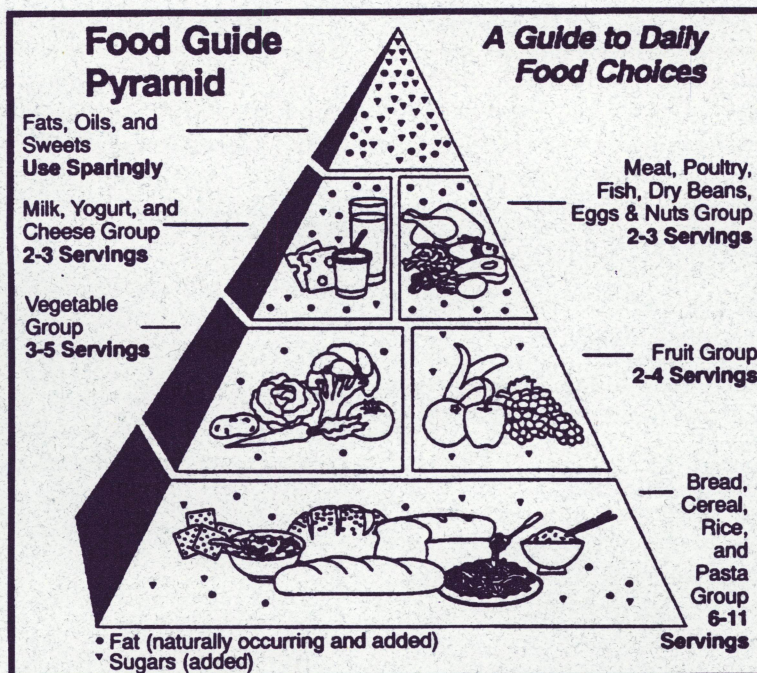
Above all, help your child establish eating habits. Remember, you are instilling healthy eating habits that can last for a lifetime. The eating habits children develop in the first 4 or 5 years of life may influence the rest of their lives. Help your child get off to a good start!

The Food Guide Pyramid as a food intake guide

When feeding toddlers and preschoolers, quality is more important than quantity. Your child will be healthier eating foods high in nutrients rather than eating large amounts of foods low in nutrients.

The Food Guide Pyramid offers a daily food pattern guide for toddlers and preschoolers. Your child needs a variety of foods from the guide's five food groups in order to consume all the necessary nutrients.

Young children need carbohydrates for energy and some fiber to help with bowel movements. Whole grain breads



The five food groups are:

1. Breads, cereals, rice, pasta
2. Vegetables
3. Fruits
4. Milk, yogurt, and cheese
5. Meats, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts

and cereals, and vegetables and fruits, are excellent sources of carbohydrates, fiber, minerals, and vitamins.

Your children need protein for growth. Milk, meat, fish, poultry, eggs, cheese, and dry beans and peas supply protein in the diet.

Children need calcium for strong bones and teeth. You'll find dietary calcium primarily in milk and milk products and, to a lesser extent, in leafy green vegetables.

Iron is an important mineral that we get from meat, poultry, fish, green leafy vegetables, legumes, and iron-fortified cereals. The body will absorb iron from cereal better if you serve it with a food rich in vitamin C, like orange juice.

Citrus fruits and their juices are good sources of vitamin C. Dark green or yellow vegetables are good sources of vitamin A. Breads and cereals contribute fiber, minerals, and B vitamins.

Small children need plenty of water to regulate body functions. Children have more water as a percentage of body weight in their bodies than adults. Therefore, children may become dehydrated faster than adults. Offer water to your preschoolers several times during the day.

Fat is a part of a healthy child's diet. Fat provides extra calories and needed nutrients for active and growing children. Do not withhold fat from children under 2 years of age. For children 2

years of age and older, fat should be added to food sparingly.

Sugary foods provide few nutrients. Children should eat them on a limited basis. Chewy, sticky, sugary, and starchy foods may promote tooth decay if left on the teeth. Teach children to brush their teeth properly after each meal.

The amount of food children eat varies from child to child. Active children naturally eat more. Size, age, sex, previous nutrition, and health history also influence your child's appetite. There will also be much variation in the quantity, both in serving size and number of servings of food your child desires, both from day to day and month to month.

Over time, the preschooler will take in adequate nutrients when allowed to choose from a variety of healthy foods.

The Food Guide Pyramid is a guideline for the number of servings to eat from each of the five food groups. The serving size for children under 6 is smaller than an adult's serving size, but increases with your child's age. Between ages 2 and 5, a serving of meat, fruits, or vegetables is loosely defined as 1 tablespoon of food per year of age. Thus, when your child is 4 years old, a serving would be 4 tablespoons or 1/4 cup.

Remember, your child is the best expert to determine what is the appropriate amount of food to eat. The table on the next page, and the Food Guide Pyramid are only guidelines.

Children have more water as a percentage of body weight than adults. Therefore, children may become dehydrated faster than adults.



Offer water to your preschoolers several times during the day.

Prevent choking by avoiding

- * hot dogs-
sliced into rounds
- * whole grapes
- * hard candy
- * nuts - seeds
- * raw peas - dried fruit
- * pretzels - chips
- * peanuts - popcorn
- * marshmallows
- * spoonfuls of
- * peanut butter
- * chunks of meat
larger than can be
swallowed whole

Choking precautions

Choking on food is a concern in children under 4 years of age. Slow down fast eaters. Remind children to swallow food before they talk. Certain foods and ways of preparing these foods can increase the risk of choking. Foods that are round, hard, small, thick and sticky, smooth or slippery should not be offered to children under 4 years of age.

A good guideline to follow for toddlers (ages 1-2) is that foods shall be cut up in small pieces no larger than 1/2" cube. Cut hot dogs into fourths, lengthwise; cook and mash carrots; cut grapes and cherries into fourths. Don't serve peanut butter by the spoonfuls. Combine peanut butter with other foods like applesauce to improve consistency.

Snacks between meals

Snacks should be a planned part of your child's daily food intake. Most young children need to eat six times a day. With their small stomachs, children find it uncomfortable to wait 4 to 5 hours between meals.

Snacks should be varied, with foods selected from the five food groups the majority of the time.

Snack time is a good time to try new foods and to prepare food together. Some healthy snack foods include:

- ready-to-eat cereal (not sugar-coated)
- meat, cheese or peanut butter sandwiches
- vegetable or fruit breads such as pumpkin, zucchini, or banana
- fresh, dried, or canned fruit
- plain yogurt with your child's favorite fruit added
- cheese and crackers
- oatmeal cookies and milk
- fresh vegetables with a yogurt or bean dip
- cottage cheese
- graham crackers, or bread sticks
- hard-cooked eggs

Food Guide Pyramid for toddlers and preschoolers

Food group	Servings suggested	Serving size	
		Toddler (Age 1 and 2)	Preschooler (Age 3-5)
Milk, yogurt, and cheese	2 or 3	1 serving = 1 cup milk; 1 1/2 ounces natural 2 ounces processed cheese. (Milk should be child-sized portions of 1/2 to 3/4 cup and cheese in 3/4 ounces to 1 ounce portions.)	
Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts several times a week	2 Serve cooked dry beans	1/2 to 1 oz 1 to 2 Tbsp	1 1/2 to 1 1/2 oz 3 to 5 Tbsp
Vegetables Dark-green leafy or deep-yellow Vitamin C and other	3 Include all types regularly. Serve dark-green leafy and deep-yellow often and Vitamin C source daily	1 to 2 Tbsp 1/3 to 1/2 cup juice	3 to 5 Tbsp 1/2 to 3/4 cup juice
Fruits Deep-yellow, Vitamin C and other	2 Serve deep-yellow fruits often and citrus daily	1 to 2 Tbsp 1/3 to 1/2 cup juice	3 to 5 Tbsp 1/2 to 3/4 cup juice
Breads and cereals Include at least three servings as whole-grain daily	6 1/4 to 1/2 oz dry cereal 1 to 2 Tbsp cooked cereal	1/2 to 1 slice bread 1/2 to 1 oz dry cereal 1/4 cup cooked cereal	1/2 to 1 slice bread
Fats, oils, and sweets	Eat these foods less often and not very much.	Do not limit fat intake in children under 2.	