

Feeding Young Children

Characteristics of Young 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 their favorite food yesterday is on the reject list today.

Children enjoy helping to prepare what they eat.

Even just opening a carton will make them feel like they have contributed to the meal. Children 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 allow for the extra time children need. Children do not have an adult's sense of time.

Encourage children to serve and feed themselves.

Eye-hand 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 smaller 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 it's okay if they spill.

When children are learning to pour or serve food, they spill. As children gain control of their 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.

Adults should model pleasant conversation and create feelings of security and pleasure at mealtimes. This will help to make new healthy foods more acceptable to your children. When other children and adults enjoy eating, young children want to "join the crowd."



Serve meals and snacks regularly.

A child's frustration level increases if made to wait for food. If they can count on regularly scheduled meals and snacks their frustration level is lower.

Use child-sized utensils.

Broad-based cups with large handles are easier for small hands to hold. Use small glasses but only fill them half way. Choose plates with rims to help children push food onto their forks and spoons. And lastly, provide child-sized forks and spoons to make it more enjoyable for children to feed themselves.

Encourage children to work together at mealtimes.

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 words like "please" and "thank you" can make mealtimes a social time. Also if children have to leave the table, they can learn to ask to be excused. Have children help to 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 food

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 which vegetables and fruits to offer to your child.
- Children like crisp foods in their meals—they like to hear the crunching of the crisp cracker or toast and feel the textures in their mouths.
- Children prefer the familiar—they want familiarity and routine in their foods. In fact, the more often a new food is served, the more likely the child is to eat it.
- Children in general prefer unmixed foods—they like foods served as separate foods. For example, instead of a casserole of ground beef, peas and macaroni children may prefer a ground beef patty with peas and macaroni on the side.



- Fingers are the child's first eating utensils—permit your children to pick up "finger foods." Partially cooked vegetables, fruits, strips of meat and hard cooked eggs cut into quarters are great finger foods. Eating finger foods is a great opportunity for little hands to practice their feeding skills.
- Stiff or even gummy textures in starchy foods are especially disliked by children—mashed potatoes are either popular or highly unpopular, depending 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 foods again at the next scheduled meal or snack.

Above all, help your child establish good eating habits. Remember, you are instilling healthy eating habits that can last 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 feeding relationship

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. Understanding the feeding relationship you have with your child will help you raise healthy competent eaters—that is children who trust their own abilities to make sure they get adequate amounts of enjoyable, nourishing food and are positive and comfortable with eating. In the feeding relationship the parent (or caregiver) and the child have their own responsibilities. Parents and caregivers must learn to accept and abide by their responsibilities and allow their children to do the same.

Parents and caregivers should decide what their children are offered, where they will eat and when it is presented. Children should decide whether or not they will eat and how much to eat.

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



For many parents this idea of a feeding relationship may be a whole new concept. Most parents want to provide healthy nutritious foods for their

children and are disappointed if their children do not eat. Research has found that parents of young children commonly use one of the following feeding styles:

Over-controlling Style—these parents and caregivers want to make sure that their children eat enough or eat the right kind of food. They try to control exactly what and how much their children eat by telling them to “clean their plates” or using food as a punishment or a reward. These parents may tell their child, “You can’t have dessert until you’ve eaten all your vegetables.” The problem with this is that children learn to decide how much to eat based on what their parents tell them to do **not** on how hungry they are. These children tend to be at risk for obesity because they begin to ignore their internal cues of fullness.

Indulgent Style—these parents and caregivers want to keep their children happy and make sure that they have enough to eat. It is not uncommon for indulgent parents to prepare a special meal for a child who does not want to eat what the rest of the family is eating or may allow their children to eat as much candy and chips as they desire. These parents use food to comfort their child when they are upset and because of that, this feeding style increases children's risk for obesity.

Responsive Style—these parents and caregivers provide their children with healthy choices, but allow them to decide how much they want to eat, or if they want to eat anything at all. These parents encourage their children to pay attention to their internal feelings of fullness (a child who is sensitive to fullness cues is less likely to overeat). Parents who use the responsive feeding style have more success in encouraging their children to try new foods. Research has shown that children may need to try a new food between 10 and 15 times before they develop a preference for the food—especially if it is bitter, sour or has unfamiliar appearance, smell or texture.

Research has shown that if you want to help your child learn to eat healthy, to encourage them to try new foods and to prevent them from over eating you must use the responsive feeding style to get the results you want.

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; choose foods selected from the five food groups.

Snack time is a good time to try new foods and to prepare foods together.

Healthy snack foods include:

- Ready-to-eat cereal (not sugar-coated)
- Meat, cheese or peanut butter sandwiches
- Breads made with fruit or vegetables such as pumpkin, zucchini, or banana
- Fresh, dried (remember to take choking precautions) or canned fruit
- Plain yogurt with your child's favorite fresh fruit added
- Cheese and crackers
- Oatmeal cookies and milk
- Fresh vegetables with a yogurt or bean dip
- Cottage cheese with fruit

- Graham crackers or bread sticks
- Hard cooked eggs

To encourage eating at snacks and meals try to:

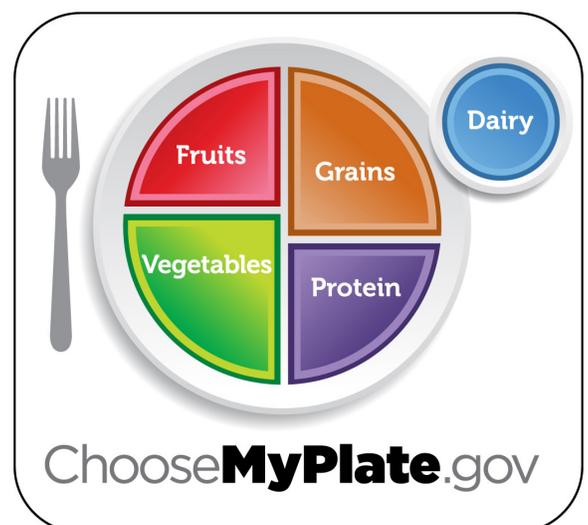
- Make mealtime and snack time pleasant
- Serve at regular times
- Schedule snacking so that it is not too close the next mealtime.



MyPlate

The 5 food groups are:

1. Grains (breads, cereals, rice and pasta—make at least half of them whole grain foods)
2. Vegetables
3. Fruits
4. Proteins (meats, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and nuts)
5. Dairy (milk, yogurt and cheese—switch to fat-free or low fat milk once your child reaches 2 years of age)



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 that are low in nutrients. The MyPlate food guide serves as a mealtime guide for feeding your young child. By choosing to serve foods from the 5 food groups shown you can provide the variety they need

in order to consume all of the nutrients they need daily. 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. If your child is 4 years old, a serving would be 4 Tablespoons or ¼ cup. Remember, your child is the best expert to determine the appropriate amount of food to eat.

Young children need **carbohydrates** for energy and **fiber** to help with bowel movements and help reduce blood cholesterol levels which may lower the risk of heart disease. **Whole grain breads, cereals, fruits and vegetables are excellent sources of carbohydrates, fiber, minerals and vitamins.**

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

Children need minerals like **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** (needed to carry oxygen in the blood and to prevent iron-deficiency anemia--it can be found in meat, poultry, fish, green leafy vegetables, legumes, and iron-fortified cereals. Try serving iron rich foods with foods high in vitamin C for better absorption); and **vitamins** like **vitamin C** (for healing cuts and wounds, healthy gums and teeth—citrus fruits are good sources), **vitamin A** (for healthy eyes and skin and helps protect against infections—dark green or yellow vegetables are good sources), and the **B vitamins** (for a variety of functions in the body like releasing energy, helping the nervous system, forming red blood cells and building healthy tissue—many breads and cereals are enriched with B vitamins).

Small children need plenty of **water** to regulate body functions. Children can become dehydrated much faster than adults because water makes up a higher body weight percentage in them. Remember to offer water to your preschooler several times a day.

Fat is a part of a healthy child's diet. Healthy fats provide calories and needed nutrients for active and growing children. Before the age of 2 children need fat to aid in normal brain

development. After the age of 2 you can start adding low fat milk and milk products to a child's diet.

Sugary foods provide very few nutrients. Children should eat them on a limited basis. Chewy, sticky, sugary and starchy foods promote tooth decay if left on 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. It is normal for young children to have variations in their appetite from day to day or week to week. Some parents would swear their child has not eaten all day and then the next day the child will eat everything served all day long. Parents need to be aware of their child's food intake over a period of time (for example, a week) rather than just focus on a daily basis. Over time, the preschooler will take in adequate nutrients when allowed to choose from a variety of healthy foods.

If you haven't already taken steps to improve your family's diet, here are some simple tips for a great MyPlate for your family:

- Avoid oversized portions
- Make half your plate fruits and vegetables
- Switch to fat free or 1% milk (for children over 2 years of age)
- Make half your grains whole grains
- Cut back on foods high in solid fats, added sugar and salt
- Compare sodium in foods
- Drink water instead of sugary drinks

Choking Hazards

Choking on food is a major concern in children under 4 years of age. To protect children from choking you should always eat with your child, model taking small bites and chewing thoroughly, serve food that is safe for children to chew and swallow, slow down fast eaters, remind them to chew completely before they speak, encourage them to take small bites, insist that they sit when they are eating and cut food into small pieces ($\frac{1}{4}$ inch for toddlers and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch for preschoolers). Avoid presenting food that is round, hard, small, firm, thick, sticky, smooth, slippery or cut into large chunks.

Feeding Young Children FAQs

Q: How much water should my toddler drink every day?

A: Water is one of the body's most essential nutrients. The daily amount of water that a child needs depends not only on their age, weight, and gender but also on air temperature, humidity, their activity level and their overall health. When looking up water intake requirements please make note that these recommendations are set for generally healthy kids living in temperate climates and you may need to ask your pediatrician for advice. These recommendations include water from all sources (drinking water, other beverages and food). With this in mind it is recommended that a 1-3 year old have about 4 cups of fluid per day and that they eat the recommended number of servings of fruit and vegetables every day. Also pay attention to their water intake if they are physically active especially in hot weather.

http://www.iom.edu/Activities/Nutrition/SummaryDRIs/~/_media/Files/Activity%20Files/Nutrition/DRIs/5_Summary%20Table%20Tables%201-4.pdf

Q: I have a toddler who refuses to drink milk. What are some alternate sources of calcium?

A: One to three year olds need 500 mg of Calcium daily. Although milk and dairy products (like cheese and yogurt) are some of the best sources of calcium, you can still get calcium from alternate food sources. The chart on the next page highlights a variety of foods that are good sources of Calcium.



Foods that are good sources of Calcium

Food or Beverage	Serving size	Calcium (mg)
Milk (skim, low fat, whole)	8 oz.	300 mg
Calcium fortified orange juice	8 oz.	300 mg
American cheese	2 oz.	300 mg
Tofu, firm, calcium set	4 oz.	250-750 mg
Tofu, soft, regular	4 oz.	120-390 mg
Yogurt	6 oz.	225 mg
Collard greens (cooked from frozen)	0.5 cups	178 mg
White beans	0.5 cups	110 mg
Almonds	1 oz.	80 mg
Bok Choy	0.5 cups	80 mg
Rhubarb, cooked	0.5 cups	75 mg
Red beans	0.5 cups	40 mg
Broccoli, cooked	0.5 cups	35 mg
Black Strap Molasses	1 Tbsp.	135 mg
Sesame seeds, whole roasted	1 oz.	280 mg
Sesame Tahini	1 oz. (2 Tbsp.)	130 mg
Amaranth, cooked	0.5 cups	135 mg

http://kidshealth.org/parent/growth/feeding/calcium.html#a_Good_Sources_of_Calcium

Q: We're vegetarians and rely on Tofu and other soy products for our protein. How safe is soy for our child?

A: It is known that soy contains molecules that interact with the body's estrogen receptors. Some studies suggest that these weak interactions may reduce the risk of developing breast and/or prostate cancer later in life. However, because there is still much to be learned it is suggested that if children consume soy, they do so in moderation (about 1-2 glasses of soy milk per day).

http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard_Health_Letter/2009/May/By-the-way-doctor-Children-and-soy-milk

Q: I see more local stores and supermarkets have organic foods available. How important is it to have organic food in my child's diet?

A: According to the USDA, organic foods are not considered to be safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced foods. Organic foods are simply differentiated from non-organic foods based on the way they are grown, handled, and processed. http://www.foodsafety.wisc.edu/HotTopics/Should_I_Choose_Organic_Foods.html



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