



# Food and Young Children

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## Introduction

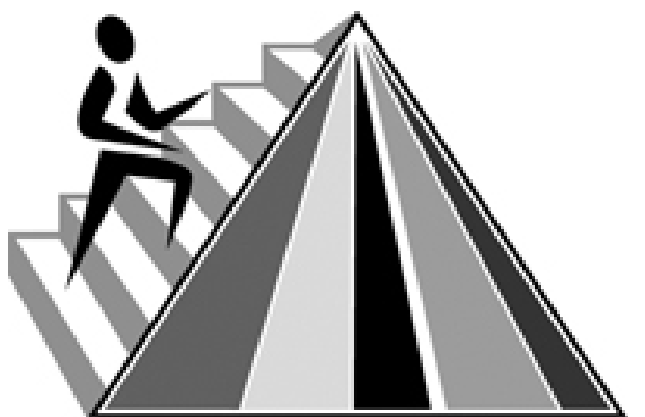
Have you tried to follow your children around on an average day? Their energy is unbelievable! Your child may not be growing as rapidly as during infancy, but important changes are taking place. Have you noticed an increase in strength and coordination? Is your child climbing, jumping, pushing and pulling more? All of these activities require nutrients - nutrients which come from food such as protein for muscles, calcium for bones, and carbohydrates for energy. No wonder preschool children eat an average of five to seven times a day!

## Nutritional Needs

**Meal Planning.** Simplicity and variety are important when planning menus for your children. The most useful guide for food selection is the USDA Pyramid. The USDA MyPyramid is a general guide that helps you choose a healthy diet.

The MyPyramid suggests that children eat a variety of foods to meet daily nutrient requirements. Each of the food groups in the MyPyramid provide some, but not all, of the nutrients your child needs each day. No one food group is more important than another. For good health, your child needs a variety of foods from all the MyPyramid food groups.

Build your child's diet following the major food groups and recommended amount of food from each of the MyPyramid food groups. The amount of food from each major MyPyramid food group depends on the amount of calories needed.



**MyPyramid.gov**  
STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOU

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets  
are also available on our website at:  
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

However, remember that portion sizes for children are smaller than adult portion sizes (Table 1).

Foods in the grains group are low in fat and provide complex carbohydrates, an important source of energy. They also provide B-vitamins, fiber, iron, and other minerals. Select whole grain breads and cereals for added nutrients and fiber.

Foods in the vegetable group provide carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins such as A, C and folate, and minerals such as iron and magnesium. Food in the fruit group provide many nutrients including carbohydrates, fiber, vitamin C and potassium. Include foods high in vitamin C and one food serving high in vitamin A from either the vegetable or fruit groups daily.

Foods in the milk group are the best source of calcium. These foods also provide protein, riboflavin and vitamins A and D. Substituting non-fat or low-fat milk for whole milk is not recommended until children are at least two years of age. Foods in the meat and beans group provide protein, B-vitamins, iron, zinc and other minerals.

**Portion Sizes.** Portion sizes for children at different ages are important. Large portions can overwhelm children to the point that they refuse to eat, particularly if they are constantly being urged to "clean up their plates." Small portions give the child a chance to eat the food and ask for seconds (Table 1). This feeling of achieving success at eating promotes a positive atmosphere and helps prevent eating problems.

Make foods easy to handle. Children enjoy eating foods they can hold. Small sandwiches, raw vegetable bits, meat in bite sizes, and fruit and cheese in small pieces that can be picked up with the fingers make eating much easier.

## Supplements

Some parents consider giving their children vitamin and mineral supplements, particularly if the children are irregular eaters. Supplements do provide some of the vitamins and minerals needed by a child. However, supplements do not provide protein, carbohydrates, and fat needed for growth. Furthermore, to be totally effective, most nutrients need each other. For instance, the body needs vitamin D, phosphorous, calcium, and protein together to make good bones. The best way to help children get these nutrients is to encourage them to eat a variety of foods.

If you think you should give your child a supplement, check with your doctor or dietitian. Let him or her be the one to decide which supplement and how much. Taking too many

vitamin supplements can be particularly dangerous for children. Vitamins A and D, and many minerals are stored by the body and could build up to dangerous levels. Be sure to follow your doctor's instructions if a supplement is recommended.

## Snacks

Few children do well on only three meals a day. Most children require two or three between meal snacks. Consider snacks as part of the meal plan, not something to be eaten in addition to regular meals. Sweet snacks should only be offered once in a while. Sweets dull the appetite for other foods, especially when eaten near mealtime. Sweet, sticky snacks that stick to the teeth should be avoided, they promote tooth decay.

## Choking

Choking on food is a problem for young children. The number one food that children choke on is hot dogs. Other foods that most often cause choking problems include carrot coins, popcorn, nuts, hard candy, large chunks of cheese or fruit, whole grapes, and thick peanut butter sandwiches. Some tips to avoid choking include:

1. Cut hot dogs and carrots in lengthwise strips not in circles;
2. Cut cheese and fruits into small enough pieces so that if they are swallowed they will not get stuck in the child's throat;
3. Use toast instead of bread for peanut butter sandwiches and only a thin layer of peanut butter;
4. Be sure children are sitting at a table in an upright position while they eat, not laying down or running with candy or food in their mouths.

## Obesity

The myth of a fat child being a healthy child is not necessarily true. In the past, when food was scarce and hard to keep, children were taught to clean their plates. "*Three square meals a day*" became a status symbol, and chubby children

were considered a credit to their parents.

We know today that a chubby child has a good chance of becoming an overweight teenager and an obese adult. Forcing a child to clean up the plate you have filled and eat more than needed, may lead to lifelong problems of overweight or obesity. Your child may get the idea he must eat everything to please you. Eating more food than necessary may give children more calories than they need, causing them to be overweight.

## Mealtimes with Young Children

Mealtimes should be times when talking and sharing, as well as eating, takes place. It can be a relaxed time for children and parents. Arguments, scolding and faultfinding should be avoided. When children learn that mealtime is fun and pleasant, they will be less likely to develop eating problems.

Mealtimes with children can involve some messiness. Eating with fingers instead of utensils, occasional spills, or food smears on cheeks and chin are to be expected. Find easy ways to take care of the spills during these early years. Use washable place mats, plastic dishes, plastic drop cloths, and plenty of paper napkins or hand towels.

Children need a fairly regular meal schedule. Knowing that they are to eat at a certain time will help them realize that eating is important. By sharing in the family mealtime, children become interested in learning to eat with a knife, fork and spoon, and they can observe acceptable behavior at the table.

**The "How" of Eating.** Learning how to eat is important. To survive the stage as successfully as possible, some pre-planning can be helpful.

- The chair should be comfortable with good support for legs and feet.
- Child-sized dishes and utensils are easier for your child to handle. Properly sized utensils make the amounts of food to be eaten look achievable. Dishes that are six to seven inches in diameter are more acceptable to young children. The dishes should be made of unbreakable

**Table 1. Children's Portion Sizes.**

Food	Approximate Serving Sizes for Children 1-3 Years Old	Approximate Serving Sizes for Children 4-6 Years Old
Milk	$\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ cup	$\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ cup
Juice or Fruit	$\frac{1}{8}$ - $\frac{1}{4}$ cup or $\frac{1}{2}$ fruit	$\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup or $\frac{1}{2}$ fruit
Cereals, Pasta	$\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup or $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce	$\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup or $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce,
		whichever is less
Bread	$\frac{1}{2}$ slice	$\frac{1}{2}$ slice
Meat, cooked	2-3 Tablespoons or 1 ounce	1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ounces
Cheese	1 ounce	1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ounces
Egg	$\frac{1}{2}$	1
Cooked dry beans and peas	$\frac{1}{8}$ - $\frac{1}{4}$ cup	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup
Peanut Butter	1 Tablespoon	$\frac{1}{8}$ cup (2 Tablespoons)
Vegetables	$\frac{1}{8}$ - $\frac{1}{4}$ cup	$\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

**Table 2. Snack Ideas\***

<b>Breads</b>		
Cheese Toast Muffins Dry Cereals, not sugar coated Cookies with Dry Fruit	Zwieback Waffles Peanut Butter Cookies	Biscuits Pancakes Graham Crackers
<b>Vegetables</b>		
Pepper Rings, Strips Stuffed Celery Raw Cabbage	Cucumber Lettuce Wedges Carrot Sticks	Tomato Wedges Raw Cauliflower Radish Slices
<b>Protein</b>		
Peanut Butter Deviled Eggs Milk Yogurt Cheese Cubes	Cheese Toast Cottage Cheese Puddings Hot Dog Strips	Hard Cooked Eggs Peanut Butter & Cracker Sandwiches Custard Vienna Sausage Strips
<b>Fruits</b>		
Apple Wedges All Juices Lemonade Popsicles Made From Orange Juice	Orange Slices Dried Fruits Limeades Melon Chunks or Balls	Grapefruit Sections Pineapple Chunks Fruit Kabobs Bananas Dipped in Frozen Fruit Juices

\*All strips, sticks, chunks, and cubes should be bite-sized to avoid choking.

material. Dishes that are lightweight slide too readily. A hotpad, washcloth, or place mat can be put under the plate to prevent sliding. Also plates with a slightly raised side help the child push food onto a spoon so it will not fall off the plate.

- A short, thick-handled spoon and fork are easier for children to use than a regular spoon and encourage small children to feed themselves. If your child cannot manipulate a spoon and fork, it is best not to force him or her to use them; instead, allow the use of fingers.
- A small glass that a child can easily hold with both hands is usually best. If the glass is unbreakable, wide at the base and slightly weighted on the bottom, there will be fewer accidents. Child-sized cups with handles also work well.

**Introducing New Foods.** Most children eat with their eyes as well as their mouths. Here are some ways to introduce new foods.

- Start with just a small spoonful or two of the new food.
- Set a good example. Members of the family provide examples that a young child often follows. When children see someone else reject food, they often do the same.
- Introduce new foods along with old favorites. It may be overwhelming to a child if all the foods served at a meal are new. Introducing new foods frequently will increase your child's chances of accepting other new foods.
- Prepare attractive and appealing foods. Foods that "look good" are frequently more appealing and more readily accepted by a child. Tasty, well-prepared foods are a definite asset to introducing new tastes.

- Keep foods separate as you prepare them. Most young children prefer the bananas and Jell-O to remain unmixed, the rice and broccoli to be served separate, and the ketchup to be next to, not on, the meat loaf. Many children like plates with divisions so different foods will not touch.
- Children who are excited, tired, or upset will often reject new food. Families, in their desire to have a well-fed child, sometimes make an issue or a "special occasion" about accepting new foods. Your child may wonder what all the commotion is and may become defensive.

### **Helping to Make Meals Appealing.**

The most important thing you can teach a child at this age is to try a variety of foods. Every child is unique with his or her set of food likes and dislikes. There are some things to remember that will help a child eat a variety of foods, enjoy them, and be willing to try new ones. Forcing food does not teach good habits.

Children's taste buds are extremely sensitive. Children are satisfied with bland foods and do not need additional salt or sugar. It may take them time to accept spicy, tart, sour, or strongly flavored foods.

Good meal planning techniques make children's meals more satisfying. An interesting combination of textures is normally pleasing to children. Many children enjoy crisp raw vegetables and fruits, smooth soups and puddings. They may also like soft-cooked eggs, tender and moist meats, chewy raisins, and dried apricot pieces.

Changing shapes also makes a more attractive meal. Cut food in strips, slices, or bite-size cubes and pieces.

Effective use of colorful foods can stimulate your child's interest and make him or her more willing and eager to try a variety of foods. Bright colors - yellow peaches, green peas, red tomatoes - catch young eyes.

**But My Child Just Won't Eat.** Experienced parents seem to agree that the best thing to do when a child won't eat a meal or a certain food, is for the rest of the family to go on eating. Make no comment at all. When other members are finished or if the child begins to play with his food, remove his or her plate. Later, if the child wants something to eat, remind him that mealtimes are times to eat and the next mealtime is dinner (or lunch, breakfast, or snack). Children's appetites dramatically change when they are going through a growth spurt or a growth slow down.

This approach avoids several pitfalls parents sometimes fall into:

1. Coaxing a child to eat when the child is going through a slow growth period and does not need as much food as before;
2. Forcing a child to eat when the child is not feeling well or when he is coming down with something which is truly affecting his appetite; or
3. Getting into a battle of wills with a child, which can turn a meal into an emotionally charged, unpleasant time for all the family (forced food is never appetizing, no matter how tasty).

**Some Things Your Child May Not Like.** There are certain foods with characteristics that many children do not care for. Knowing this may help you understand some of your child's reactions to foods. Many children do not care for:

- Gummy foods that stick to their mouths or their hands.
- Foods containing seeds that may be accidentally chewed on.
- Combinations or mixed dishes where it is hard to pick out a single food and eat that food alone.
- Foods that "run all over the plate" and cannot be picked up with either a spoon or with the fingers and placed on a spoon or fork.

- Very dry, rough, or stringy foods.
- Very hot or very cold foods; children usually prefer food at room temperature.
- Strongly flavored foods or very spicy foods.
- Foods that have an off-flavor; children's taste buds are very sensitive and they may detect off-flavors and smells before an adult does.

**Manners.** Manners, like good eating habits, are learned through good examples. In fact, a child may be a good reflection of your own manners. Do not expect adult manners in small children. Give the child a chance to practice good manners, but do not stress manners more than the food or the people sharing the food.

Usually, by the time children are three years old, they feed themselves without making a mess. A four-year-old usually needs very little assistance in feeding and serving. Children this age enjoy eating with the family but usually have trouble sitting through a long meal. Five-year-olds begin to show independence at meals. At this time, they are usually using a knife and fork. School-aged children often have definite preferences for foods and say so! They pass bowls of food well; however, an occasional spill may still occur. These ages are just guidelines, so do not worry if your child does not fit them perfectly.

## References

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