

## Healthy Meals and Happy Snackers

When it comes to a young child's favorite school-time activities, "snack" often appears near the top of the list—and making the most of this favorite time is critical for child development. Eating habits are shaped early in life. Food preferences formed during early childhood often persist into adulthood (Birch, 1987). These early healthy habits can carry into adulthood, decreasing the risk of chronic disease. Anemia, obesity, dental caries, and growth retardation are nutritional concerns for preschoolers to which society should attend, as it is more effective to teach children nutrition early than to change the status of their health in later years (St. Pierre, 1982).



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### Why Teach Nutrition?

School is an ideal place for children to learn and practice good nutrition (Fuhr and Barclay, 1998). According to the 2006 National Dairy Council:

#### **Recent health statistics show today's children are at risk.**

- Only 2 percent of children meet the daily Food Guide Pyramid recommendations.
- The number of overweight children has nearly doubled in the past ten years, putting one out of four children in the overweight category or at risk for becoming overweight.
- Sixty-one percent of overweight children ages 5 to 10 have one or more heart disease risk factors.
- Less than 1 in 4 children get at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day.
- Type II diabetes is becoming more common in overweight children.

#### **Good nutrition and good education go hand in hand.**

- Good nutrition helps kids grow, learn, and do well in school.
- Children benefit from good nutrition by having higher test scores, fewer behavioral problems, and better attendance.
- Research shows that teaching children about nutrition promotes better eating habits and choices today and into adulthood.
- Next to parents, teachers are important role models. If teachers talk about and choose healthy foods, children will, too.

## How to Teach Nutrition

Preschoolers are curious and want and need opportunities to learn about nutrition. It has been reported that preschoolers can learn nutritional concepts including:

- the names and sources of foods.
- the need to eat a variety of foods.
- that some foods are healthier than others.
- that foods have different tastes, textures, shapes, colors, and smells.
- that good foods keep germs out of the body and provide energy.
- that a low-fat diet keeps the heart healthy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1992; Gorelick and Clark, 1985; Singleton, Achterberg, and Shannon, 1992).

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the best way for children to learn about nutrition is to be involved with actual food—not just to sing songs about food or to answer questions (Kendrick, Kaufmann, and Messenger, 1995). Developmentally appropriate, activity-based, and food-based programs are all necessary to develop healthy eating habits and complement other learning such as mathematics, science, oral language, social development, cooperation, and respect for other cultures.

**Activity-Based Programs** The preschool-age child learns by physical manipulation of his or her environment. Physical, activity-based programs have been effective in increasing nutrition knowledge and changing food habits. Effective activity-based learning can include:

- art projects.
- class visitors.
- songs, jingles, role-playing, and games.
- stories, dramatic presentations, and puppets.
- field trips.
- felt boards, puzzles, and computer lessons.
- replacing unhealthier plastic foods in the dramatic play center with replicas of breads, fruits, and vegetables.

**Food-Based Programs** Actual food experiences are ideal for teaching children about food and nutrition (Birch, 1994). Food preference is a function of tasting and looking. The social context in which food is presented influences food preferences and eating behaviors.

- Build self-esteem and good eating habits by having children plan, prepare, and serve nutritional snacks.
- Have children create smiling faces using rice cakes and cheese, make frozen banana sticks and applesauce, or bake muffins.
- Choose cultural theme days for meals and snacks.
- Use seed catalogs and raw vegetables to talk about edible parts of plants. Conduct a taste testing with various vegetables, or make vegetable soup.
- Shop together at a local farmer's market or farm and have a tasting party.
- Discover physical changes in foods when ingredients are mixed and baked. Shape breads or pretzels before putting them into the oven.

### **Making the Most of Meal and Snack Times**

It is important to promote a child's positive relationship with food by establishing a pleasant eating environment and following nutrition and portion size guidelines.

#### **Pleasant Eating Environment**

Provide a place for each child at an appropriately sized table. Model, encourage, praise, and practice using utensils. Provide a variety of attractively served foods. Involve children in serving. Introduce new foods with favorites. Be sensitive to flavors that are too spicy and to serving food that is too hot or too cold.



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**Nutrition Guidelines** As a rule, preschools should eliminate or restrict high-sugar, high-fat, and highly processed foods and beverages and offer tasty, wholesome snacks. The Food Guide Pyramid is an outline of what to eat each day. It's not a rigid prescription but a general guide that let's you choose a healthful plan for eating (Kendell and Puck). Using the food pyramid with preschool children will ensure that they are getting a variety of foods and the right amount from each food group.

**Portion Size** To accommodate varying appetites, provide small portions and encourage children to ask for second helpings. Because of growth spurts and competing interests, a preschooler's appetite can vary from day to day. Make meal and snack time pleasant by not putting pressure on children to clean their plates. Snacks can be a good way to get in nutrients not gotten at meals, so it's important to plan your snacks wisely. Choose snack foods that represent at least two food groups and a mix of nutrients.

### **Nutritious snacks include:**

- English muffin pizzas with slices of tomato or mushrooms.
- waffles topped with fresh seasonal fruit.
- tortillas with beans.
- yogurt and fruit topped with cereal.
- trail mix made with granola, dried fruits, nuts, or sunflower seeds.
- fruit-flavored yogurt spread on graham crackers and frozen into "sandwiches" (Dean, 1998).

Family involvement is one of the most important components for a successful preschool nutrition program. Having a school staff that understands the importance of teaching and evaluating a nutrition program is essential (St. Pierre and Rezmovic, 1982). Families and staff should work together to understand how to best meet children's nutritional needs. Teaching and modeling how to eat wisely and moderately is an important investment. Forming healthy eating habits during the early years is not only important and beneficial but also can prove to be interesting and fun.

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