

Healthy Eating for Children Ages 2 to 5 Years Old: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

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Introduction

Rapid growth and development occurs during the preschool years, ages 2 through 5. A child grows about 2 to 3 inches and gains 4 to 5 pounds each year. Proper nutrition and opportunities to play and be physically active are critical to ensuring your child grows properly, learns to enjoy nutritious foods, and adopts healthy behaviors for maximum development and lifelong health.

This publication covers various topics of interest to parents and caregivers of young children and gives an overview of optimal feeding practices.

Jobs of the Parent/Caregiver, Jobs of the Child

The first step to healthy eating is knowing who is responsible for what.

- Parents and caregivers should provide structure, support, and opportunities. They should choose the what, when, and where of healthy eating.
- Children choose whether or how much to eat from what their parents provide.

Fundamental to the jobs of the parent and caregiver is to trust children to decide whether or how much to eat. If parents do their jobs with regard to feeding, children will do their jobs with eating.



Parents'/Caregivers' "Jobs"

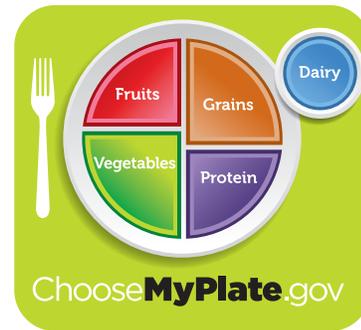
- Choose and prepare the food.
- Provide regular meals and snacks.
- Make eating time pleasant.
- Do not let children graze between meals and snack times.
- Show children food and mealtime behavior.

Children's "Jobs"

- Eat the food.
- Eat the amount they need.
- Learn to eat the food their parents eat.
- Grow predictably.
- Learn to behave well at the table.

MyPlate Food Guide

The second step to healthy eating is knowing what foods are healthy choices. MyPlate is a guide for building a healthy plate for children and the entire family. The Daily Food Plan chart from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows the portions needed for a preschool child for an entire day. These amounts are not meant to be prescriptive. Listen to your child's cues to know if he or she is hungry or full.



Healthy Eating ^{for} preschoolers Daily Food Plan



Use this Plan as a general guide.

- These food plans are based on average needs. Do not be concerned if your child does not eat the exact amounts suggested. Your child may need more or less than average. For example, food needs increase during growth spurts.
- Children's appetites vary from day to day. Some days they may eat less than these amounts; other days they may want more. Offer these amounts and let your child decide how much to eat.

| Food group | 2 year olds | 3 year olds | 4 and 5 year olds | What counts as: |
|---|-------------|--------------|-------------------|--|
| Fruits  | 1 cup | 1 - 1½ cups | 1 - 1½ cups | ½ cup of fruit? ½ cup mashed, sliced, or chopped fruit ½ cup 100% fruit juice ½ medium banana 4-5 large strawberries |
| Vegetables  | 1 cup | 1½ cups | 1½ - 2 cups | ½ cup of veggies? ½ cup mashed, sliced, or chopped vegetables 1 cup raw leafy greens ½ cup vegetable juice 1 small ear of corn |
| Grains Make half your grains whole  | 3 ounces | 4 - 5 ounces | 4 - 5 ounces | 1 ounce of grains? 1 slice bread 1 cup ready-to-eat cereal flakes ½ cup cooked rice or pasta 1 tortilla (6" across) |
| Protein Foods  | 2 ounces | 3 - 4 ounces | 3 - 5 ounces | 1 ounce of protein foods? 1 ounce cooked meat, poultry, or seafood 1 egg 1 Tablespoon peanut butter ¼ cup cooked beans or peas (kidney, pinto, lentils) |
| Dairy Choose low-fat or fat-free  | 2 cups | 2½ cups | 2½ cups | ½ cup of dairy? ½ cup milk 4 ounces yogurt ¾ ounce cheese 1 string cheese |

 Some foods are easy for your child to choke on while eating. Skip hard, small, whole foods, such as popcorn, nuts, seeds, and hard candy. Cut up foods such as hot dogs, grapes, and raw carrots into pieces smaller than the size of your child's throat—about the size of a nickel.

There are many ways to divide the Daily Food Plan into meals and snacks. View the "Meal and Snack Patterns and Ideas" to see how these amounts might look on your preschooler's plate at www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers.html.



Portion Sizes for Preschoolers

In general, portions sizes of foods have increased over the past few decades. Larger portions may give children the impression that they should eat more than they really need. To help establish a healthy concept of portion size and to prevent overfeeding, serve a "kid-friendly" portion size of foods, snacks, and drinks. This is not the same size you would offer an adult. Usually, younger children need about half the portion of an

adult. Use smaller plates, forks, spoons, and cups for children.

Your children's appetites will guide their need for more food, and they can ask for more to eat if they are still hungry. Don't meddle in how much food is right by saying, "Clean your plate" or "Are you sure that is enough?"

Instead, help them know when they've had enough. Kids who "listen" to their own fullness cues stop eating when they are full, are less likely to become overweight, and are less likely to eat based on visual cues. Give your children a chance to stop eating when they feel full, even if you think they aren't.

- Let them learn by serving themselves. Teach them to take small amounts at first and tell them they can get more if they are still hungry.
- Avoid praising a clean plate. A child should stop eating when he or she is full.
- Reward a child with attention and kind words, not food. Rewarding a child with sweets lets the child think sweets are better than other foods.

Young children are naturally good at determining how much to eat if not influenced by others.

Use Phrases That Help, Not Hinder

Parents/caregivers play the biggest role in a child's eating habits. What you say and do has a large impact on their development. Negative phrases (phrases that hinder) can easily be changed into positive, helpful ones (phrases that help)!

Phrases That HINDER

"Eat that for me."

- Phrases like these teach your child to eat for your approval and love.

"You're such a big girl. You finished all your peas."

- Phrases like these teach your child to ignore fullness.

"See, that didn't taste so bad, did it?"

- This implies to your child that he or she was wrong to refuse the food and can lead to unhealthy attitudes about food or self.

"No dessert for you until you eat your vegetables."

- Offering some foods in reward for finishing others makes some foods seem better than others.

Phrases That HELP

"This is a kiwi fruit. It is sweet like a strawberry."

- Phrases like these help to point out the sensory qualities of food. They encourage your child to try new foods.

"Has your tummy had enough?"

- Phrases like these help your child recognize when he or she is full. This can prevent overeating.

"How do you like that?"

- Phrases like these make your child feel like he or she is making the choices. It also shifts the focus toward the taste of the food rather than who was right.

"We can try these vegetables again another time. Would you like them cooked in pasta next time?"

- Reward your child with attention and kind words, not with food.

Picky Eaters

Picky eating is common for many children from the ages of 2 to 5 years, and it is a common concern for parents. A child may eat only a certain type of food or refuse foods based on their color or texture. They may also play at the table and not want to eat. Don't worry if your child is a picky eater.

As long as your child has plenty of energy, is at a healthy weight, and is growing properly, he or she is most likely eating enough to be healthy. If you have concerns about your child's growth or eating behavior, talk to his or her doctor.

Try some of these tips to help with your child's picky eating.

- **Let children be “produce pickers.”** Let them choose the fruits and veggies at the store. Better yet, help them start a small container garden at home.
- **Have children help to prepare or even invent meals or snacks.** Children learn and get excited about tasting food when they help make it. Let them add ingredients, scrub veggies, or help with stirring. For example, make your own trail mix from cereal and dried fruit.
- **Offer choices.** Rather than asking, “Do you want broccoli for dinner?” ask “Which would you like for dinner, broccoli or cauliflower?”
- **Offer new foods first.** At the beginning of the meal, your child is the hungriest.
- **Serve foods plain if that is important to your preschooler.** To keep different foods separate, try using plates with sections. For some children, the opposite works and serving a food mixed in with a familiar item is helpful.
- **Cover and set aside.** When children pick at food or don't eat a child-portioned meal in hopes of snacking on sweets instead, cover the plate and set it aside. If your child gets hungry between meals, offer the last meal's plate until it is time for the next meal. So, left over oatmeal may become the mid-morning snack or reheated broccoli becomes a bedtime treat!
- **Name a food your child helps to create.** Make a big deal about serving “Katie's salad” or “Ben's banana bread” at dinner.

- **Sometimes new foods take time.** Think about what it might be like for a child not to know if something is sweet, salty, or spicy. You will likely need to offer new foods many times before your child will even try it, and it may take up to a dozen tries for a child to accept a new food. Don't give up!

- **Let your child play before mealtime.** It's a great way to get some of that fidgety energy out. Kids are more receptive to eating their meals then, too.

- **Be a good role model.** Try new foods yourself and describe their taste, texture, and smell to your preschooler.

Getting Your Child to Eat Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables contain many nutrients that are critical to a preschooler's growth and development. A person's eating habits are established as young as 2 to 3 years old, which means a child who eats a diet rich in vegetables at a young age is more likely to eat vegetables as an adult. The same is true for fast foods, sweets, soda, etc.

Remember, some foods have to be offered many times to a child before the child will even try the food! Begin with offering one new vegetable at a time and keep offering it. Introduce a small taste first and let your child spit it out, if needed.

Thrifty Snack Ideas

Let your child's appetite and growth pattern determine if snacks are needed or not. Choose smart, fun snacks and meals, such as:

- **English muffin pizza:** Top half an English muffin with tomato sauce, chopped veggies, and low-fat mozzarella cheese. Heat until the cheese is melted.
- **Smiley sandwiches:** Use thin slices of peppers for a mouth, a cherry tomato for a nose, and smaller cut veggies for eyes on an open-faced hummus or turkey sandwich. Be creative with bananas, strawberries, and other fruit on sweet sandwiches.
- **Frozen bananas:** Cut large, peeled bananas in half, then insert a wooden popsicle stick. Wrap in plastic wrap and freeze. Once frozen, peel off the plastic wrap and enjoy.

- **Frozen graham cracker sandwiches:** Mix mashed bananas and peanut (or almond) butter. Spread between graham crackers and freeze.
- **Fruit smoothies:** Blend fresh or frozen fruit with yogurt and nonfat or low-fat milk.
- **Ants on a log:** Spread a thin layer of peanut (or almond) butter on narrow celery sticks. Top with a row of raisins or other diced dried fruit.

Family Mealtimes

Mealtime is a time to regroup as a family, discuss the day, plan family outings, share stories, and connect. Family meals allow your preschooler to focus on the task of eating while giving parents or caretakers a chance to model good behaviors. It takes a little work to bring everyone together for meals, but it's worth it and the whole family eats better. It may not be possible to eat together every day, but try to have family meals most days of the week. Meals should be provided at regular times when your preschooler is hungry but not starving. Try these tips for making family meals enjoyable:

- **Focus on the meal and each other.** Turn off the television. Take phone calls and texts later.
- **Talk about fun and happy things.** Try to make meals a stress-free time.
- **Don't lecture or force your child to eat.** See the section Use Phrases That Help, Not Hinder.
- **Have your child help you get ready to eat.** Children can clear, wipe, or set the table; hand out napkins or silverware; turn off the TV; or remove toys or other items from the kitchen.
- **Involve your child in conversation at the dinner table.**

Healthy Drinks

The best choices for children's drinks are water and nonfat or low-fat milk. Offer only water or milk with meals and snacks. Do not offer fruit juice, soda, fruit drinks, or sports drinks. Also, be aware that your children are watching what **you** drink.

Offer only water or milk with meals and snacks.

Setting a Good Example

Preschoolers love to copy what their parents do. They are likely to mimic your table manners, likes and dislikes, willingness to try new foods, and physical activities. Try the following tips for setting a good example.

- **Eat together.** Eat meals with your child whenever possible. Let your child see you enjoying fruits, vegetables, and whole grains at meals and as snacks.
- **Share the adventure.** Be willing to try new foods together.
- **Cook together.** Encourage your preschooler to help you prepare meals and snacks.
- **Model and teach kitchen safety.** Tell children what is safe and what is not.
- **Keep things positive.** Discourage older children and other family members from making yucky faces or negative comments about unfamiliar foods.
- **Play together.** Go for a walk, dance or jump together, and be silly. Just get moving!

Other Healthy Behaviors to Promote

Vitamins/Supplements

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies in American children are very rare, so vitamin and mineral supplements are not usually needed. Sometimes a child may need a vitamin and mineral supplement for a short period of time. Talk to your physician or pediatrician if you think your preschooler may need a supplement.

Dietary Sodium

Remember that taste preferences are established at an early age. A child who becomes accustomed to salty foods will continue to want them. Fresh foods are naturally low in salt. Most packaged and processed foods contain salt and contribute to the majority of sodium in Americans' diets.

Brushing Teeth

Good oral hygiene for infants and young children, including brushing teeth, should begin when the child's first tooth erupts. Visiting the dentist should begin at 12 to 15 months of age.

Sleep

Preschoolers need 11 to 14 hours of sleep each day, including naps and nighttime sleep.

Physical Activity

It is important that you as a parent or caregiver provide play times so your child can be active. Physical activity helps expend extra energy, which may help your child pay better attention to learning activities and rest better at night. Limit screen time (TV, computer, video games, etc.) to less than two hours a day and get your child moving for at least 60 minutes each day. Any physical movement can count for kids, like walking, swimming, raking leaves, throwing or kicking a ball, or making a snowman. Research shows greater health benefits when children are exposed to natural settings (grass, trees, etc.), so let children play outdoors when possible.

Additional Resources

“Health and Nutrition Information for Preschoolers”; U.S. Department of Agriculture, MyPlate.gov website – www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers.html

“Healthy Kids”; Fruits & Veggies – More Matters website – www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/get-kids-to-eat-fruits-and-vegetables

SuperKids Nutrition website – www.superkidsnutrition.com/



Photo by Jason Nelson