



LESSON 3 FOOD FOR THE PRESCHOOLER

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DEVELOPMENT OF FOOD HABITS

Nutritionists once believed that young children, left on their own, would be able to select enough nutritious food to stay healthy. That may be true if children are offered only nutritious foods from which to choose. Today's young children live in a world in which television commercials encourage them to eat candy, presweetened cereal, soft drinks and many other foods which by themselves do not make-up a well-balanced diet. The ability to eat wisely in such an environment cannot be left to instinct or chance alone.

Good nutrition is a positive factor affecting the quality of one's whole life and is, to a large extent, determined by one's food habits. When does good nutrition begin? Dietary practices which are developed during infancy and early childhood influence growth and development during the critical early years and determine lifetime eating habits. It is important for the caregiver to help the child establish good habits and wholesome attitudes toward food early in life. Food habits are the end result of all the experiences children have had with food and all the attitudes, preferences, and dislikes children have developed in relation to food. We generally say that food habits are good when the child eats the kinds and amounts of food needed for normal growth and development. The development of such food selection habits should begin very early in life.

The Role of the Family

The preschool child learns by example and experience what to eat and what attitudes to hold toward food. The family setting is the predominant influence on the formation of eating habits in young children, although they will learn from all sources to which they are exposed. It is not only what adults say and the food provided for the children which count. Young children are apt to imitate the food selection and eating behavior of parents and older brothers and sisters.

Characteristics of Young Children

Parents must be aware of certain behavioral and developmental characteristics of preschoolers if they are to provide an environment conducive to the development of good food habits. Eating behavior changes greatly from birth to six years of age.

In general, the healthy infant has a good appetite. Toward the end of the first year and during the second year of life the child may show a decrease in appetite corresponding to a slowing of growth rate. The child may exhibit growing independence by choosing not to eat. During this period it is probably best to allow the child to adjust the amounts of food he or she is able to eat at any one time. Remember that children at this early age have a smaller digestive capacity and may not be able to eat one-third of the day's nutrient

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requirements at each meal. They may eat smaller meals and wish to snack when they feel hungry between meals. Establish a regularly scheduled snack time rather than allowing continuous snacking. A habit of continual eating, developed in early childhood, could lead to unconscious continual eating and perhaps overweight later in life.

The three-four year-old may dawdle over food but does show an increase in appetite over the previous year and can eat more at one sitting. By age six, most children should have developed a healthy, stable appetite. Each child is, of course, an individual, but will generally follow a pattern similar to that of others in his or her age group.

Children learn very quickly that a good way to gain attention is to refuse food. The best way to overcome this practice before it becomes a habit may be to ignore it. Approval at the right time will teach the child what are favorable practices. Children, especially between the ages of two and four, may go on "food jags" and eat only one food for days at a time. Again, the child outgrows these food quirks more quickly if the parent does not pay special attention to them.

Food Characteristics

Childhood characteristics and family influences on food preferences are, of course, external to the food itself. The sight, sound, smell, feel, familiarity, and taste of foods influence a child's reaction to them although how much or in what ways is not really known. We do know that a preference for a sweet taste is present very early in life. This suggests that it may be best to limit a child's exposure to sweet foods.

Introduce young children to a wide variety of tastes. Young children may not always be eager to try new foods. New foods should be introduced in small amounts, one at

a time, and with foods already familiar to the child. Children may be more motivated to try a food item if other family members seem to enjoy it. If the child does not want to try a new food, don't use force. Try serving it again in a few days, perhaps prepared in a different way. Preference for previously unfamiliar foods has been shown to increase with repeated exposure.

Pleasurable eating experiences can help the young child understand textures, tastes, colors, and shapes of many different foods. Taking children grocery shopping or allowing them to help in the preparation of foods will also stimulate their curiosity about, and their familiarity with, a wide range of foods.

Social context

The context in which foods are presented is also a factor in determining food preferences. For example, it has been shown that children show a greater preference for foods which are presented as rewards or are a part of pleasant adult-child interaction. This suggests that parents must be very careful about using foods to reward or punish, and in selecting foods for parties, holidays, and other special occasions. If children are refused dessert until they eat their vegetables, they receive the message that vegetables are less desirable than desserts and are conditioned to think that sweets are special.

Outside Influences

The home and family may be the chief influence on the food habits of a young child but there are other influences. Child care centers, nursery schools, radio and television programming and advertising expose the child to new experiences with the sight, smell, and taste of food and bring new food ideas or patterns into the home. Advertising can be very persuasive

in selling foods that are non-nutritious, particularly if consumed in large amounts or at frequent intervals. Unfortunately, the main message that preschoolers get is that if food is sweet, it's fun and, by implication, good for you. At the same time, advertising implies that foods not advertised as often (vegetables, fruits, meats, breads, dairy products - in short, most nutritious foods) are not good to eat. Parents, however, still play a central role in tempering the effects of outside influences. They can refuse to buy non-nutritious foods.

Summary

Desirable attitudes toward foods and good food habits will not just happen. Adults must guide children in the development of good food habits. Dietary practices developed in early childhood influence early growth and development and lifetime eating habits. Children can learn to enjoy good nourishing foods in amounts adequate to supply essential nutrient and caloric intake. Children can learn to prefer fruits and vegetables to soft drinks and high sugar snacks. Parents should introduce children to a wide variety of nutritious foods early in life. In addition, adults must be conscious of other factors which affect a child's attitudes toward

food and eating -- the child's stage of growth and development, the adult's own eating habits, and outside influences. Eating habits are an important part of the child's makeup for life and deserve the time and effort needed to develop them in a desirable manner.

SNACK TIME

Bread with a spread or topping is a popular snack. Vary the bread as well as the spread or topping. Loaf breads have different textures, colors, flavors, and shapes if you choose raisin, whole wheat, or French bread instead of the more usual white. If you enjoy baking yeast bread, snack time can be soon after the bread comes out of the oven. The aroma will have stimulated appetites.

Biscuits, muffins, rolls, bagels, pita, and English muffins are other breads you might use. Cereal is in this group, too. Dry cereal may serve as a snack for some children, but others may prefer a bowl of cereal with milk.

Crackers are available in all shapes, sizes, and flavors. Graham, soda, and saltines are the most popular crackers. Melba toast and zwieback may be good for the child who is teething. Pretzels and bread sticks are other options.

You may wonder if cookies and other baked dessert items are included in the Bread and Cereal

	Cookies Plain 2 2.5" dia	Bread Whole-wheat 1 slice	Bread White, Enriched 1 slice
Calories	120	65	70
Protein, g	1	3	2
Fat, g	6	1	1
Carbohydrate, g	15	14	13
Calcium, mg	8	24	21
Iron, mg	0.3	0.4	0.3

Group since they are made with the same basic ingredients as bread. They do contribute many of the same nutrients but the ratio of nutrients to calories is lower as you can see in this comparison.

For this reason, we do not count cookies, cakes, and pies as foods in this food group. If you chose four pieces of white cake for the four servings from this group, you'd get 1000 calories as contrasted to the 300 or so you'd get from four slices of bread.

KIDS IN THE KITCHEN

The three-year-old can use arm and hand muscles to stir food mixtures. Make sure the child starts with clean hands and a clean work area. A hint for this activity is to use a mixing container twice the size of the recipe. Secondly, a damp cloth between the bowl and the counter top will help prevent slipping.

First mixing efforts can be with hands. This enables the child to feel the texture of individual ingredients and to note changes as the mixing progresses. Wooden spoons and rubber spatulas can also be used, especially with recipes that are "runny" and easy to stir. The five-year-old can use a rotary beater. Avoid letting preschoolers use electric mixers.

Remember, the child can use cleaning skills for wiping up spills. The adult should handle hot cooking pans.

MIXING IDEAS: tossed salad, pancakes, muffins, quick breads, cereal snack mixes.

MEALTIME MANNERS

Plan for spills and messes. Newspapers or an old plastic tablecloth can go under and around the high chair to catch spills. Keep a sponge or damp cloth handy to wipe up spills. For the older

child, a placemat of plastic or terry cloth can make clean-up easier. A terry hand towel is about the right size for a placemat.

If the child upsets a glass of milk, don't scold. Try to be positive. Ask the child to help with cleaning up the mess by getting the sponge or mop for you or by actually wiping up the spill. Remind the child where to set the glass of milk so it is less likely to get knocked over, and to hold it with both hands.

It is all right to let the child know you are upset but don't make the child feel bad. Slapping, shaming, threatening, sending the child to an isolated area for a mistake at mealtime, or telling a child he is bad or stupid, or not talking to a child are examples of negative interaction. Each of these actions can hurt a child and result in low self-esteem or lack of self-confidence.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

Mealtime activities can help children learn about colors, shapes, and textures of food. Asking questions helps children learn new words as well as classification systems. Try these questions with small children:

Colors

We have red beets for dinner. What other foods can you name that are red?

Shapes

There is a food on my plate that is round. What is it? What other round foods can you name?

Textures

What foods are we eating that are crunchy? soft? chewy?

Food Groups

What are we eating for lunch that contains milk? What are we eating that contains eggs?