

**LESSON 5****FOOD FOR THE PRESCHOOLER**

Jo Anne Barton, Ann A. Hertzler, and L. Janette Taper  
*Extension Specialists, Foods and Nutrition*

Publication 348-134

Reprinted March 1985

## OVERWEIGHT/OBESITY IN THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

Do you have a cute plump child--the type of child adults feel compelled to cuddle? Not too long ago, a plump preschooler was thought of as robust and cute. Any concern for overweight was usually dismissed with the comment: "He'll outgrow his baby fat." Overweight in a child was viewed as beneficial and temporary. Today we recognize that neither of these attitudes is necessarily correct. Obesity is one of the major nutrition-related health disorders of our time. Concern with weight, a favorite obsession of American adults, is slowly filtering down to children. That cute, overweight child may have health and social problems now and in the future.

You can't control or dictate the quantity of food your child eats, and you shouldn't try. Neither can you control or dictate the kind of body your child develops, nor should you try. What you can do, and it is a great deal, is to aid your child in choosing his or her food intake as carefully/thoughtfully as possible so that he or she will develop a healthy body.

Many nutritionists have recently become convinced that an important factor in childhood obesity is the way in which the child is fed in the early years. Children may be overfed as a result of our affluent lifestyle--or of a misunderstanding of feeding practices--or of an ethnic culture

that places undue emphasis on food--or of parents who may be overweight themselves and impose their own eating habits on their children. What then can you, the parent, do to help your child regulate his or her eating patterns? The following hints may be helpful:

Provide Regularly Scheduled  
Meals and Snacks - Having set and reliable eating times gives your child a sense of order and predictability. Help your child to pay attention to his or her food so that he or she can be aware of enjoying the food and can sense feelings of fullness and satisfaction. Encourage slow and attentive eating by eating that way yourself. If you gobble your food, chances are your child will too. If you enjoy and savor your food, your child will imitate that behavior.

Plan Meals and Snacks That Are  
Satisfying - You can help your child regulate his or her appetite by planning meals and snacks that are truly satisfying. This should cut down on the times your child ends up eating at irregular times, searching for the satisfaction missed at mealtime. Plan meals and snacks around the Four Food Groups. Serve a wide variety of foods. Be cautious about foods which are high in calories, but low in other nutrients. Foods that are fried or prepared with a good bit of additional fat will be high in

Virginia Cooperative Extension Service programs, activities, and employment opportunities are available to all people regardless of race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, handicap, or political affiliation. An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and September 30, 1977, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Mitchell R. Geasler, Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension Service, and Vice Provost for Extension, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061; Clinton V. Turner, Administrator, 1890 Extension Program, Virginia State University, Petersburg, Virginia 23803.

LD  
5655 -  
A9762  
No. 348-134  
VPI  
Spec

calories. Foods that are high in sugar content may also be high in fat, and the combination makes for particularly high-calorie foods. Cakes and pies are examples. Develop strategies for limiting the frequency of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods. Children (and adults) don't need candy bars often. They don't need potato chips for lunch every day. They don't need sweet desserts after every meal. You do not have to cut out such foods altogether. Nor do you need to make restrictive changes all at once. Make gradual shifts in your menu planning.

Don't Insist Your Child Eat Everything on the Plate - If you served the portion, you may have overestimated the child's capacity. If the child served the portion, children's eyes are notoriously "bigger than their stomachs." Learn to adjust portion sizes to needs. Children can always have seconds if they still feel hungry. However, children who are rewarded for "cleaning their plates" or "eating another forkful for Daddy" may learn to overeat and to equate eating with parental approval and love rather than hunger.

Don't Offer Dessert As A Reward for Finishing the Main Course - This teaches the child that sweet desserts are the best part of the meal. It also "tricks" the child into eating more than he or she really wants. A dessert isn't necessary for every meal. When dessert is served, select fruit, puddings, custard, or ice cream which add nutrients as well as calories.

Watch Intake of Sweet Beverages - Offer your child milk, juice, or water with meals and snacks. Drinking soda or other high sugar/low nutrient beverages in response to thirst can provide

excess caloric intake with no nutrient value. They can also spoil the appetite for more nutritious foods. Water is excellent for quenching thirst. Children should be encouraged to drink it.

Encourage Exercise - Energy intake and output must be balanced to control weight. There are a number of ways you can encourage an increased level of activity. Develop an active family recreation style. Regulate television watching. Provide toys and partners for active play. Ask the child to do small chores (remove own plate from table, empty wastebasket, bring in newspaper) which involve some body movement.

Early eating patterns can affect the child for the rest of his or her life. The youngster who becomes accustomed to overeating, eating for reasons other than hunger, and snacking on low nutrient/high calorie foods may continue to do so. He may also develop a physical make-up that favors the storage of fat and may have to struggle against overweight his entire life. On the other hand, by tempering your child's diet during the early years, you can help establish healthful eating habits now and for the future.

## SNACK TIME

What about junk foods? Do they have any place in the diet of a preschooler? It may surprise you to learn that there is no real agreement about which foods are junk foods. You may think of candy, soft drinks, and chips as junk foods. Others would say that any food, no matter how nutritious, consumed in such large quantities as to crowd out other foods is a junk food.

Probably a better way to describe most of these foods is to say that they have low nutrient

density. Most have calories from fat and/or carbohydrate, but may contribute insignificant amounts of other nutrients. A few may have good amounts of several nutrients, but one could get those nutrients for fewer calories from other foods. See the following comparison of milk and ice cream. A few foods may have good amounts of one or more nutrients. Powdered beverage mixes to which Vitamin C have been added are an example.

	Whole Milk	Ice Cream
	1/2 cup	1/2 cup
Calories	75	135
Protein, g	4	2.5
Fat, G	4	7
Carbohydrate, g	5.5	15
Calcium, mg	145	85

There's no need to eliminate all foods with a low nutrient density from the diet. Just don't let them take the place of foods which contain the needed nutrients. If a preschooler is allowed to squander 200 calories on cookies and a soft drink, then the remaining 1100 or so calories he consumes will have to meet all of his nutrient needs. If the cookies are served with milk, then the nutrient contribution is greater.

## KIDS IN THE KITCHEN

### MASHING AND JUICING - Four-year-old

#### Mashing

Select a bowl the child can hold and a kitchen fork.

Let the child practice mashing:

- soft bananas
- cooked vegetables (e.g., potatoes)
- stewed fruit (e.g., apples, pumpkin)

- cooked dried beans
- cooked eggs

Select a recipe that the child can prepare:

- deviled eggs
- banana bread
- bean dip

#### Juicing

A wet cloth under the juicer or a second pair of hands will help prevent the juicer from slipping.

The child needs to learn two motions - pushing down and turning. Rolling citrus fruit on the counter top will help make it easier to juice.

The child can prepare fresh orange juice or lemon juice for lemonade for a snack.

#### Banana-Nut Bread

Whole wheat flour	1 3/4 cups
Sugar	1/2 cup
Baking powder	1 tablespoon
Salt	1/4 teaspoon
Walnuts, chopped	1/2 cup
Oil	1/3 cup
Eggs	2
Bananas, mashed	2 medium (about 1 cup)

Grease 9 X 5 X 3-inch loaf pan. Preheat oven to 350 F (moderate). Mix flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, and nuts thoroughly. Mix oil and eggs together. Mix in bananas. Add dry ingredients to banana mixture. Stir until just smooth. Pour into loaf pan. Bake 45 minutes or until firmly set when lightly touched in center top. Cool on rack. Remove from pan after 10 minutes.

## MEALTIME MANNERS

The way the table is set can make a meal more enjoyable. The way the table looks gives clues as to how the table setter regards the meal. Are food and tableware "thrown at the table" or are they arranged in an orderly fashion for a real meal?

The placement of eating utensils can make them easy to reach, thus minimizing accidents. The "rules" are designed to insure this.

For the infant, set the glass squarely in front of the child, an inch or so from the front edge of the tray. When you're ready to add a bowl and spoon, place the bowl where you had placed the glass with the spoon at the right. Move the glass to the tip of the spoon. If you have a leftie, put the spoon and glass to the left of the bowl.

When the child moves to the table, put down a placemat to protect the table or tablecloth. Place the plate in the center of the space, again about an inch from the edge of the table. If you expect the child to use a fork rather than a spoon, place the fork to the right of the plate and omit the spoon. Place the glass at the tip of the fork or spoon.

Later when a knife is needed, the knife is placed to the right of the plate and the fork is moved to the left. This assumes the first bite might be something which would have to be cut. To cut, hold the fork in the left hand; the knife in the right. Beverages continue to be placed to the right since most persons pick them up with the right hand.

It's quite permissible to reverse the setting for a left-handed person.

## FAMILY ACTIVITIES

Many families celebrate special events with foods. Birthdays and holidays are often a time when high-calorie foods, particularly sweets, are served. You may want to offer some alternatives for persons who are trying to reduce the calories, fat, sugar and/or sodium they consume.

Have the family plan and prepare foods for celebrations together. Plan foods that are nutritious, special, and that everyone can help with. Here are some ideas:

- Festive Breads--Quick breads or yeast breads
- Decorated Muffins
- Fancy Cheese Balls/Dips
- Tasty Bean Dips/Spreads
- Vegetable Trays
- Fruit Bowls
- Homemade Ice Cream
- Crunchy Cereal Balls
- Meat/Cheese Spreads