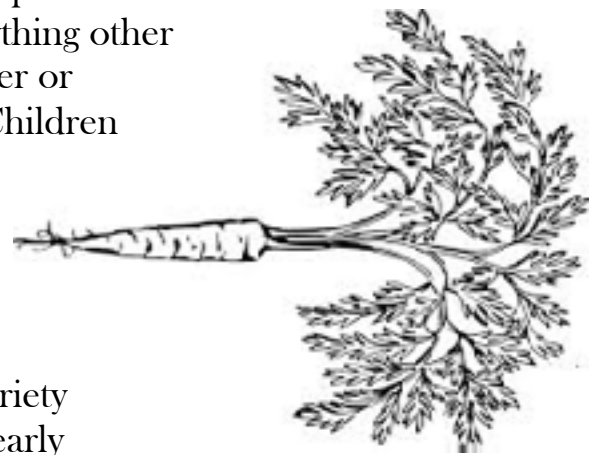


Developing Healthy Eating Habits in Children



In the United States, close to 75% of children aged 3 to 6 spend some amount of time in child care (15 hours per week on average). Child care providers take on an important role in helping to develop healthy habits in our nation's children. Approximately 50-75% of younger children's daily energy intake occurs while in full-time child care settings, making this an excellent environment for encouraging healthful eating (American Dietetic Association, p. 607). What happens when children refuse to eat anything other

than chicken nuggets? What happens when the toddler or preschooler would rather play than sit down to eat? Children who display picky eating habits can cause care providers to worry about what they're eating, or not eating. Despite fussiness about what they eat, most children eat a variety of foods and get adequate nutrition in their diet over the course of the week.



On occasion, limited variety in food choices during early childhood could lead to concern about possible nutrient deficiencies and poor health. Finding a middle ground concerning food will help most children learn to eat well and enjoy a variety of foods over time.



The following pages will discuss how to identify if your child is a good eater and the roles and responsibilities of both child care provider and child with regards to meal time. The additional insert includes two fun activities for you and your children to enjoy.

References

American Dietetic Association. (2011). Position of the American Dietetic Association: Benchmarks for nutrition in child care. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 111, 607-615. doi: 10.1016/j.jada.2011.02.016

Satter, E. (2000). *Child of Mine: Feeding with love and good sense*. Bull Publishing Company, Boulder, CO.

* Capable Children: developing a desire and curiosity for new foods *

When caring for children, try to not “paint yourself into a corner” with regards to snack and meal time. If not careful, feeding children can become stressful and tiresome. Extensive efforts to make your child eat, such as hiding vegetables in foods and catering to five different meal requests, will create more problems than will be solved. If the demands of children displaying characteristics of picky eaters are given into on a continual basis, they will become even “more demanding and less capable with eating” (Satter, p. 385). Eventually the person responsible for feeding picky eaters will require going to great lengths, often resulting in exhaustion and stress. Consequently, children might not develop a healthy curiosity for trying new foods, will likely lack self-discipline and control, and will not respect limits in place for preparing and eating meals (Satter, p. 385).



Most people desire meals that taste and look good, but a child care provider should not need to cater to or coax children into eating. Young children like to know what to expect, need opportunities to learn and grow, and require set limits. With regards to trying new foods, children will taste a new food because their desire to learn is so great and because they look to their role models (adults and older children) to do as they do. If this task is made too easy, however, by receiving their every demand, children will not learn to enjoy the process and accomplishment of trying new foods (Satter, p. 385).

According to child feeding expert, Ellen Satter, your child is a good eater if you answer yes to the following questions (p. 386):

- Does your child like eating and feel good about it?
- Is he interested in food?
- Does he like being at the table?
- Can your child wait a few minutes to eat when he is hungry?
- Does he rely on internal cues of hunger and fullness to know how much to eat?
- Does he rely on variations in appetite to know what to eat?
- Does your child enjoy many different foods?
- Can he try new foods and learn to like them?
- Can he politely turn down foods he doesn't want to eat?
- Can he be around new or strange food without getting upset?
- Can he “make do” with a less-than favorite food?
- Does he have pretty good table manners?
- Can your child eat in places other than home?

Your role as child care provider “broadens from providing structure and limits to teaching and guiding” (Satter, 386). Encouraging a child to try new foods by saying something like, “If you had never tried a pickle or strawberries, you wouldn’t know how yummy they are. You might like this bread too. If you choose not to try it, you might miss out on something you would enjoy.” This approach could be positive or negative depending on the adult’s comment. However, if the comment was made with intention to get food into the child, then it is a negative comment and could be detrimental to the child’s learning experience concerning food despite best intentions of the adult (Satter, 386).



* Child Care with Respect to Feeding *

A child’s eating behavior is influenced by the development of teeth, coordination skills, and independent behaviors. When feeding children, caregivers should be aware of self-feeding and division of responsibility among child and adult. As children grow and mature, their coordination and feeding skills improve. They go from eating with their fingers to eating with utensils and drinking from a cup. To support self-feeding let the child regulate her food intake, model appropriate eating behaviors, provide healthy meals and snacks, provide appropriate eating utensils, and establish eating times and



locations (Satter, p. 380). The division of responsibility in feeding is not black and white, but gray. Ideally, feeding children will require some controlling, but not too much; somewhere between overbearing and negligent. Find a middle ground between forcing a child to eat and telling the child to eat anything in the refrigerator. With feeding children, responsibility should be divided between the extremes. The “what, when, where of feeding” is the responsibility of caregivers; the “how much and whether of eating” are responsibilities of children (Satter, p. 380).

* Division of Responsibility in Feeding Children *

Child's Role:

1. Decide how much to eat.
A child's food intake will generally match her/his needs. The amount of food a child eats is up to the child.
2. Decide what to eat from the foods served.

Young children like:

- Simple meals with food separated from each other
- Finger foods
- Foods with bright colors and varied shapes

Young children often do NOT like:

- Highly seasoned food
- New foods

3. Decide if they will eat.

Children should eat only if they want to eat. They should never be forced or coerced to eat.



Child Care Provider's Role:

1. Select and buy nutritious foods from the 5 food groups (vegetables, fruits, whole grains, protein, and milk).
2. Make and offer nutritious, balanced meals.
3. Make and offer nutritious snacks.
4. Give the child food they can handle.
5. Decide when meals and snacks are offered.
6. Insist the child be present at meals, but do not make the child eat.
7. Model appropriate eating behaviors.
8. Reinforce appropriate eating behaviors and ignore inappropriate behaviors.
9. Make family meal times pleasant (provide comfortable seating and easy-to-use utensils).





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