

# Supporting Healthy Eating

## ***How Adults Impact Children's Eating Behaviors***



**Sources:**

Young Children, Journal of the National Association of Young Children, March 2011.

*Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, Ellyn Satter; MS, RD, LCSW, BCD.

Mealtime Memo for Child Care—National Food Service Management Institute

My Pyramid Nutrition Education Series.

Maximizing the Message: Helping Moms and Kids Make Healthier Food Choices; USDA.

[www.mealsmatter.org](http://www.mealsmatter.org) (Dairy Council of California).

# Our Relationship with Food

As we examine the various eating behaviors in young children, it's good to spend some time examining our own relationship with food. All of us who raise children or care for them must feed them.

Our expectations of feeding children come from our own relationship with food, both how we were raised and how we think about food in our lives every day. Eating behaviors of young children may challenge adults to rethink long held expectations about food and mealtimes.

Questions that may impact how we prepare meals for our families and children in care:

- ✧ Are meals something to be enjoyed leisurely or finished as efficiently as possible?
- ✧ Are we concerned with weight issues?
- ✧ Do we love to cook or don't enjoy much about food preparation?
- ✧ Are we very concerned about choosing the "healthiest" foods or is healthy food information overwhelming?
- ✧ Do we expect children to "clean their plates" or are we comfortable when children don't eat all that we prepared?
- ✧ Are there lots of different food preferences within the child care or does the group tend to like only certain foods?
- ✧ Does the mix of age groups make meal scheduling a challenge?

These questions have no right or wrong answers, but encourage us to reflect on how we think about food in our own lives. Young children depend on the caring adults in their lives to support their well being and promote positive development including healthy eating behaviors.

We know that we want to be good role models for our children. Children's food preferences and willingness to try new foods are influenced by the people around them.

This training will cover developmental phases that affect how children eat and will discuss how adults can positively influence the eating behaviors of young children.



## Development and Eating

As young children leave infancy and become toddlers, we expect lots of changes. Toddlers are very busy people. With boundless energy, they are almost too busy to eat! As early childhood continues, we can expect changing eating behaviors until about age 5.

Developmental changes that impact feeding young children include:

- ☑ Growth slows down and starts coming in spurts.
- ☑ With slower growth, appetite is not as great.
- ☑ Greater sense of independence means saying “no” a lot, including to foods.
- ☑ Young children are naturally suspicious of new foods.
- ☑ Young children have small stomachs and cannot manage large meals.

Every child has different growth and temperament, even with several two year olds in care, you can't predict how each one is going to eat on any given day. For caregivers and parents, lots of patience is needed.

Observe how children eat over a few days or a week instead of one meal or one day. Children often don't eat much for a day or so, but make up for it over time. When meals are reliable and varied with healthy food choices, research shows that children eat well enough to support their growth.



Young children are naturally fearful of new, unfamiliar foods. This protective behavior, observed in humans and other animals, helps prevent young from eating harmful substances.

Repeated, non-judgmental exposure to a new food reduces a child's fear of the food and helps increase acceptance. Research tells us that presenting a new food 10 to 20 times or more appears necessary to increase acceptance of the food.

Although children are skeptical of many foods during the early childhood years, the variety of foods they accept is greater in this developmental phase than it is later in childhood. Practice patience and perseverance.

Plan meals and snacks that accommodate the fact that young children cannot eat large meals. Plan balanced meals and don't worry that sometimes children won't eat all the foods presented. Another meal or snack will be along in a few short hours.

## What Is a Healthy Eater?

A healthy eater is someone who:

- ☺ Likes eating and feels good about it.
- ☺ Is interested in food.
- ☺ Likes being at the table.
- ☺ Can try a new food and learn to like it.
- ☺ Can wait a few minutes to eat when hungry.
- ☺ Can eat until full.
- ☺ Can stop eating when full.
- ☺ Can politely say no when not hungry.
- ☺ Can politely say no to an undesired food.
- ☺ Can be around new or different food without getting upset.
- ☺ Has pretty good table manners.
- ☺ Can make do with less than favorite food.



A stressful atmosphere does not help children become healthy eaters. Expecting children to “clean their plates” may lead to overeating. Too much emphasis on eating may make children too anxious to eat! Coaxing, bribing, or serving only the foods young children want to eat may cause children to further limit food choices.

We know young children pass through developmental phases that result in eating behaviors that are challenging to adults such as being picky, finicky, or eating one food to the exclusion of others. What can we do that best helps create the healthy eaters listed above?

As an educator in family childcare you have the unique opportunity to serve families’ young children over a period of time in a home atmosphere. By supporting healthy eating and pleasant mealtimes, you become a role model for the entire family.

The Division of Responsibility that follows on the next page and continues in more detail on later pages, gives you the framework for children to become healthy eaters .

Check out the “10 Tips for Setting Good Examples” on page 9 of this training and share with parents.

# Division of Responsibility in Feeding Children

Based on the evidence of years of research, when adults and children maintain a division of responsibility, mealtime becomes more positive for everyone.

- ***The caregiver/parent is responsible for what, where, and when to eat.***
- ***The child is responsible for how much or whether to eat.***

The caregiver/parent's jobs:

- Choose and prepare the food.
- Provide regular meals and snacks.
- Make mealtimes pleasant.
- Show children what they have to learn about food and mealtime behavior.
- Do not let children graze between meal and snack times.

Fundamental to the job of adults is trusting children to decide how much or whether to eat. Based on developmental phases, we know children sometimes don't want to eat, or don't want to eat what is served, or are satisfied with a couple of bites. Patience and a non-judgmental attitude are essential.

If we do our jobs with feeding, children will do their job with eating:

- Children will eat.
- They will eat the amount they need.
- They will learn to eat the foods the childcare/family eats.
- They will grow predictably.
- They will learn to behave well enough at the table.

Children are interested and capable of eating and learning about foods. The next pages explain the caregiver/parent's jobs in more detail.



# Choosing and Preparing Food

Adults know that children need nutritious meals and snacks. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal pattern for children is the framework that educators use to plan a variety of foods that meet the required components at each meal.

Encourage children to help plan menus and get them involved in meal preparation as much as they are able to do so. Even very young children can participate meal planning and preparation.

Some enjoyable ways to include children:

- ✧ Have children help pick out foods using pictures or grocery store flyers. Keep a chart according to the meal patterns of fruits/vegetables, meat and meat alternates, and grains/breads. Spend some time planning meals together. You may be surprised at some of the combinations, but that's what makes it fun.
- ✧ Introduce new foods with other foods that children enjoy. Plan menus so that a new food is paired with a familiar food.
- ✧ Plan meals that include foods that are easy for young fingers.
- ✧ Plan meals that include a variety of color, textures, and flavors.
- ✧ Have tasting parties where both new and familiar foods are presented such as:

Veggies in different textures  
Fruits in different colors  
Cheese in various shapes  
Different types of breads



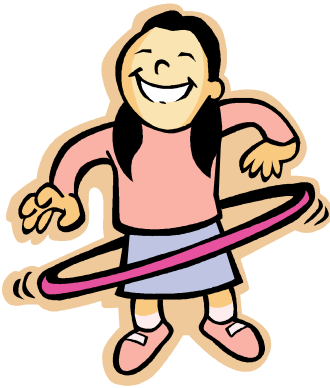
Remember, it's a party so let children explore the food and choose to eat or not eat! Let children serve themselves from small bowls.

- ✧ Have conversations about how things look and feel in your hand and in your mouth. Avoid conversations about how healthy a food is. Accept that young children can't understand food nutrition rules and describing foods in such a way makes it harder to enjoy eating.
- ✧ Involve children in meal preparation whenever possible! Use the chart on page 10 to help guide you in appropriate tasks that children will enjoy.

## Provide Regular Meals and Snacks

Many families struggle to have family meals with today's busy schedules. In the family child care home, you have the advantage of planning regular meals and snacks according to your group's needs.

Children will get into the meal habit and learn to expect food at regular intervals. It is recommended that young children have a meal or snack at about 2 hour intervals. School-age children can manage 3-4 hour intervals.



Physical activity during the day helps children be hungry for the next meal. As a family child care educator, you are required to build in 60 minutes of physical activity during each day. You can break this time into shorter segments that work best for your particular group.

After playing, help children get ready to sit down for a planned meal or snack. Young children do well with a quiet activity such as reading a story or singing as a transition from play to mealtime.

As a participant in the Child and Adult Care Food Program through Yours for Children, Inc. (YFCI), you are reimbursed for up to 2 main meals and 1 snack per child per day.

If children are in care for the entire day you may be feeding more meals than we can reimburse, or you may have children that attend for only one meal during the day. It's up to you and your child care schedule to decide which meals and snacks to serve and when. Let the children's needs guide you when to have meals.

If children aren't eating well at a particular meal, review how your meal schedule may be contributing. Scheduling meals is a balancing act that may need to be adjusted occasionally.

Remember, as you set your meal schedules, you must keep us informed of any changes in mealtimes. You may use the yellow CIF to change meal times, or for internet claimers, send an email with your provider number in the subject to [yfci@yoursforchildren.com](mailto:yfci@yoursforchildren.com).

If you need any assistance in planning your meal schedule, YFCI is always available for advice. Call your Area Coordinator or the YFCI office and we'll help you figure out meal schedules that work for the food program and your child care schedules.



# Make Mealtimes Pleasant

This is not as easy as it sounds! As caregivers, we want children to eat well at every meal. We worry that they are not going to be well nourished if they don't eat well all the time. Remember the discussion from page 3, take a deep breath and relax.

The setting for meals needs to be comfortable. Chairs should be high enough so that a child can reach the table. Feet shouldn't be dangling, so use a foot stool if needed.

Turn down the noise. Young children are easily distracted by television, music, phone calls, and loud conversation. Help everyone focus on eating by creating a calm atmosphere.

Consider that serving meals "family style" may lead to very pleasant mealtimes. The CACFP supports family style dining in child care. For family style dining:



- ☺ Be prepared! Talk with children about what will happen. Let them "practice" a meal in the play area.
- ☺ Provide child-sized plates, cups, and utensils. Plastic serving bowls with wide lips are easiest for young children to handle.
- ☺ Have all the food on the table at the beginning of the meal. Have enough food to meet the meal pattern and allow for seconds. Some food may spill as children learn how to serve themselves. Allow for this.
- ☺ Think about the child's ability to serve himself. For some children, you may need to start with one or two foods as self-serve, while you serve them the other foods that are required in the meal pattern.
- ☺ Some children may need more help, you can seat them near you.
- ☺ Expect spills. Children are learning and accidents will happen. Wipe up spills without a fuss.
- ☺ Children often want to try new foods when they see other children and adults eating them.

No matter how you serve meals, the important task is make mealtime happy with pleasant conversation.

- 👍 You can talk about food color, texture, and how it's prepared. "Yes, these cucumbers are crunchy."
- 👍 You can encourage conversation about non-food topics. "What did you play in sandbox today?"
- 👍 Don't comment on who eats what or how much.
- 👍 Make sure you have enough time so that no one is rushed through the meal.



## Learning About Food and Mealtime Behavior

Adults are the most important role models for teaching children about acceptable mealtime behaviors. Manners are important and even young children can behave well enough to have a meal at home, at childcare, or out with company.

Children need limits and do not benefit from being allowed to say “Yuck” about the foods served at meals. A simple “no thank you” stated calmly will not hurt anyone’s feelings, including the person who prepared the food.

Think about the messages you are giving children when you talk to them about food. Over emphasizing healthy foods or tight restriction of other foods can lead children to view foods as good or bad. We cannot expect children to learn to manage all the food choices in life if we don’t give them a way to practice. It’s OK to include cookies and chips into our meals as additional foods occasionally.

Exposing children to unfamiliar foods in a way that lets them explore the food even if they don’t eat it lets children practice calm behavior around new foods. Healthy eating means that children can be around different foods and not get upset.

## No Grazing Between Meals and Snacks

Grazing is the free access to food and beverages (except water) between regular meals and snacks. We are all probably guilty of this sometimes, but for children grazing can make it impossible to eat at mealtime. Young children eat best when they arrive at the table hungry.

If you are caring for children who have been allowed to “graze” and drink beverages any time, you will have some challenges...but stick with it. Learning not to graze and drink calorie laden beverages between meals in early childhood will help children through later phases in growing up where the pressure to eat can be great.

New guidelines that encourage drinking water throughout the day and having drinking water available to children are important steps in discouraging consuming too much juice or soda.

We all can mistake thirst for hunger so having a drink of water will often be just what is needed between meals. When children are active and playing, it is water their bodies need not sports drinks or other calorie laden beverages.



# 10 Tips For Setting Good Examples

As such an important influence in children's lives, there are many things you can do that are fun and will help children learn healthy eating. Cook together, eat together, talk together, and have mealtime = together time.

- ★ **Show by example!** Eat fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Let children see you snacking on raw vegetables, too.
- ★ **Go food shopping together on occasion.** Discuss where fruits, vegetables, grains, milk, and meat come from. Let children choose between a few items.
- ★ **Get creative in the kitchen.** Cut food into easy shapes. Encourage your child to invent new snacks. Try "creating creature" snacks from different components, like veggies, cheese, and crackers.
- ★ **Offer the same foods for everyone!** Stop being a "short-order" cook. Always have at least one food that you know everyone likes.
- ★ **Reward with attention, not food.** Show your love with hugs. Choose not to offer sweets as rewards so that children don't think sweets or dessert foods are better than other foods.
- ★ **Focus on each other at the table.** Talk about fun and happy things at mealtimes. Turn off phones and TV. Make meals a stress-free time.
- ★ **Listen to the children.** If a child says she is not hungry, let her eat only as much as she wants. Offer limited choices. Ask "which would you like for lunch—broccoli or cauliflower?" instead of "Do you want broccoli for lunch?"
- ★ **Limit screen time.** Allow no more than 2 hours of TV a day, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- ★ **Encourage physical activity.** Make physical activity fun for everyone. Involve the children in the planning. Play with the children instead of sitting on the sidelines. Set an example by being active.
- ★ **Be a good food role model!** Try new foods yourself. Describe its taste, texture and smell.

# Preschool Feeding Characteristics

## 1– 2 year olds:

- 👍 Can drink from a cup.
- 👍 Uses a spoon and later a small fork.
- 👍 Very independent. Prefers to feed self. (Use bite-sized easy to pick up foods.)
- 👍 Eye/hand coordination still developing, expect spills.
- 👍 Has clear ideas about eating and not eating.
- 👍 Likes to watch and help.
- 👍 Imitates others.
- 👍 Can scrub fruits and veggies.
- 👍 Tears lettuces and greens and snap green beans.

## 3 year olds:

- 👍 May have food jags that last a short time.
- 👍 May learn to get attention by refusing to eat. (Do not give attention when child refuses to eat.)
- 👍 Asks “why”. Is curious and ready to learn.
- 👍 Can name foods.
- 👍 Capable of stirring and adding ingredients.
- 👍 Can shake a drink in a sealed container.
- 👍 Can knead bread dough.

## 4-5 year olds:

- 👍 Handle dishes and utensils safely.
- 👍 Can set the table.
- 👍 Influenced by television. Asks to have advertised foods.
- 👍 Like to help and enjoys eating cooking projects.
- 👍 Can peel some fruits and vegetables like bananas.
- 👍 Can measure dry ingredients.
- 👍 Can measure wet ingredients with help.
- 👍 Can cut soft fruits and vegetables with a plastic knife.



# Yours for Children, inc.

303 - 313 Washington Street  
Auburn, MA 01501  
1-800-222-2731  
www.yoursforchildren.com

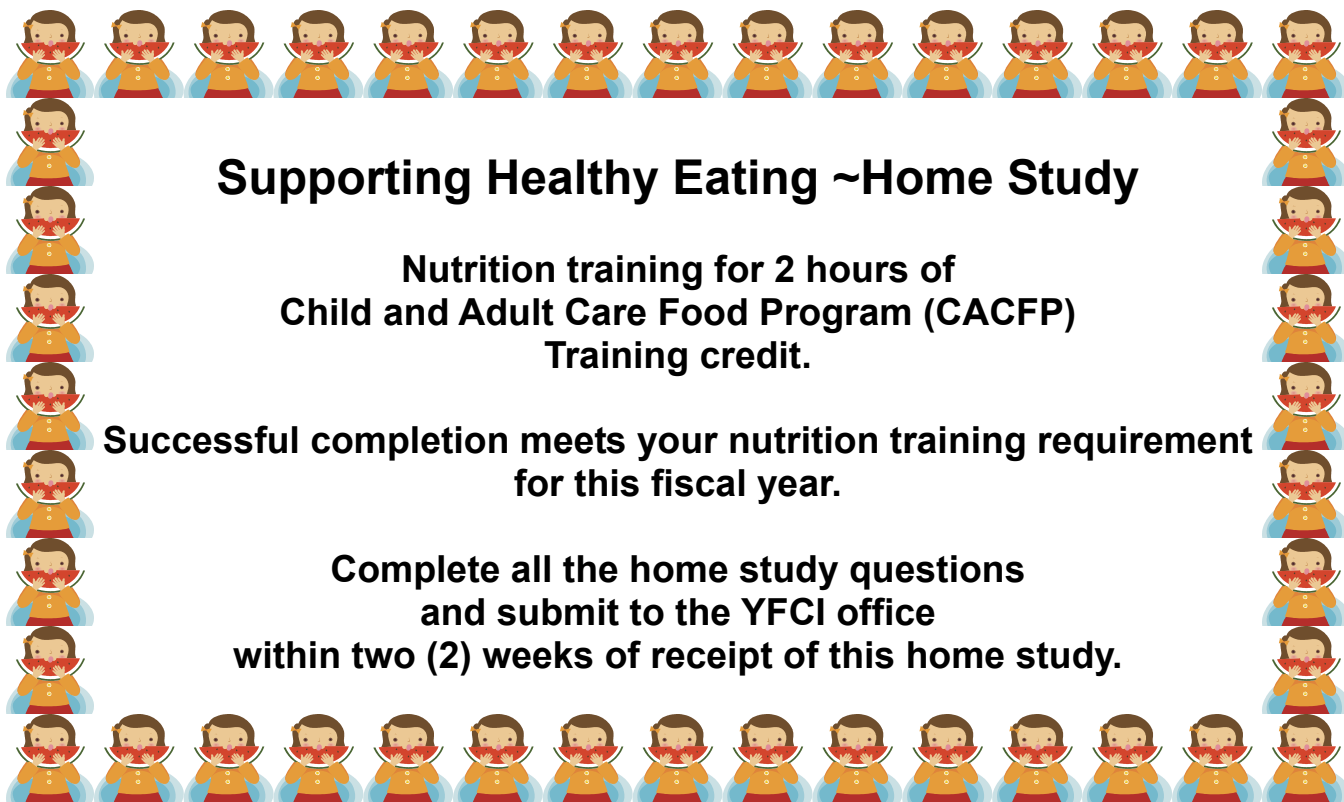
Non Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit No. 37  
Auburn, MA

## Address Service Requested

One hundred percent of the funding for this program and publication is provided by USDA and, therefore, any publications may be freely copied by USDA, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and by any other institutions under the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Please credit the listed source when given or Yours for Children, Inc. when not given.

**TO:**

***Nutrition Training  
June 2011***



## Supporting Healthy Eating ~Home Study

**Nutrition training for 2 hours of  
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)  
Training credit.**

**Successful completion meets your nutrition training requirement  
for this fiscal year.**

**Complete all the home study questions  
and submit to the YFCI office  
within two (2) weeks of receipt of this home study.**

In accordance with Federal law and the U.S. Department of Agriculture policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 or (202) 720-6382 (TTY). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.