

Improving Early Childhood Nutrition in Your Childcare Program

A child's early years are a crucial time for nutrition. Children experience a great deal of physical and cognitive growth during this time and need the right nourishment to support their development. At about six months old, children begin eating their first solid foods. This is an opportunity to start teaching children about proper nutrition and help them develop healthy eating habits as early as possible.

Importance of childhood nutrition

Eating the right food during early childhood supports children's overall development. There are so many benefits of good [childhood nutrition](#) and consequences for a lack of it. It's important for childcare providers to understand why it needs to be a priority. Some of the things that good nutrition helps accomplish are:

- Stable energy and moods
- More consistent sleep patterns
- Improved cognitive function, concentration, and alertness
- Lower chances of chronic disease and illness
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Stronger bones and teeth

How to develop healthy eating habits

As a childcare provider, you spend a lot of time with your children and play a critical role in their development. You have the opportunity to help them develop healthy eating habits that could stay with them throughout adulthood. Here are some strategies for instilling healthy eating habits in children:

- **Monitor their initial choices:** Keep an eye on children's meal or snack activity to see what their existing nutritional habits are. This will help you figure out what needs to be adjusted in the future. Make a plan to introduce healthier options gradually.
- **Set an example:** Children are very observant and will absorb what they see the adults around them do. If you make healthy food choices daily, children are more likely to follow your lead and aren't exposed to unhealthy habits.

- **Avoid battles over food:** Children can be picky sometimes. If they adamantly refuse certain foods, even healthy ones, it's better to let it go, give them other options, and try again another time. Eventually, most children will open up to different foods and healthier choices.
- **Have a routine:** Set an established meal or snack routine for your children. Create a menu or meal plan that you can pull from each week. Having a set schedule with healthy options normalizes healthy eating throughout the day.
- **Focus on the positive, not the negative:** When you have conversations about nutrition with children, focus on what they should eat instead of what they shouldn't eat. Focusing on the food they can't have can make them feel deprived and negative about healthy eating. Make it a good thing that they have so many delicious food options, not bad that they can't have unhealthy ones.
- **Don't use food as a reward:** Children must understand that food is something we consume to give us energy and nourish our bodies. Using it as a reward or as a form of affection can teach them to connect their emotions with food, causing unhealthy habits. Give them verbal praise or other consequences as a reward instead.
- **Provide healthy snacks:** Stick to a snack time routine in your schedule to keep children full and energized between meals. Provide plenty of healthy snack options that feature a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein. Since snack portions are often smaller than meals, this can be a good time to introduce children to new flavors and textures that can later be incorporated into mealtime.

Explaining healthy eating to children

Helping children to understand good eating habits isn't just one conversation – it's a daily practice. You aren't just teaching them how to eat healthy foods; you're also teaching them to have a healthy relationship with food. So, using different activities and practices over time will give them an understanding of good nutrition.

Here are some ideas to explain healthy eating to children:

- Read the nutrition facts of different foods with children, so they understand how to identify healthy foods
- Challenge children to make the most colorful plate possible when they're choosing meals and snacks
- Educate them on the "powers" that different vitamins and minerals have and how they can help their bodies grow big and strong
- If you have the space, plant a garden and show children how to grow fruits, vegetables, and herbs

- Keep fresh fruit on hand and easily visible, so it becomes the first choice for snacking
- Use food as art to make it more appealing and fun before eating it
- Involve children in the selection of food for the day, the preparation of those foods, and the clean up after eating
- Incorporate veggies into a variety of food forms to ease them into a child's diet, such as spiralizing broccoli or baking zucchini into muffins
- Share nutrition education activities and habits with families so they can adopt them at home

Set children up for lifelong nutrition habits

Early childhood is an important time for establishing mindsets and habits. Instilling a good relationship with food from the start will make it easier for children to make healthier choices throughout their development and in the future. Make nutrition a positive and fun experience for children, and don't forget to lead by example.