



Nutrition in Early Childhood Education

Setting the foundation for good nutritional habits is a vital part of early childhood. Early childhood educators have the opportunity to be a positive nutritional influence on the young children in their care. This month we will be looking at the many ways to promote good nutritional habits in your program!

Exposing Children to Nutritional Foods

The National Health Institute states that one of the best ways to promote healthy eating is repeated exposure to nutritional foods. Even if a child claims to dislike a particular food, it should still be served in small quantities. If a child does not typically eat vegetables, continuing to serve them and encouraging the child (without pressure) to try them can be beneficial. It can take more than 10 exposures to a certain food before a child may try it. Keep in mind that mealtimes should be a pleasant experience. A child should never be made to feel bad for not trying a particular food.

It is important to keep the language surrounding food choices positive and encouraging. We want mealtimes to be an enjoyable experience for our children. Celebrate when a child tries a new food. Let them know you are proud of them. Mealtimes provide a great opportunity for meaningful conversations. Creating a warm, positive environment for mealtimes can help to encourage children to try new foods.

Keep in mind that children who are well-fed with nutritious food are more likely to have positive learning experiences. Good nutrition helps children to focus and, partnered with a full night's sleep, provides children with the energy to get through the day.



Laying the Foundation of Nutrition with Infants

Positive nutrition habits start right from birth. For infants, it is important to create warm, inviting feeding environments. For bottle-fed babies, be sure to hold and cuddle them. This is a great time to talk to them or sing to them. For older infants, who are eating baby food or table food, try to make mealtimes a one on one experience. This is a great time to sing familiar songs or talk about what they are eating. Talk about the colors of the foods they are eating. You could also begin introducing math concepts like counting. For example, “Let’s count how many cheerios you have.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends feeding infants on demand for the first few months. Eventually they will establish their own feeding schedule of every few hours. Babies often give cues to show when they are hungry or full. Some cues that indicate that a baby is hungry include, clenching fists, making sucking noises, or flexing their arms and legs. The AAP mentions that crying can be a sign of hunger, but typically babies exhibit some of these other signs first. Some cues that indicate that a baby is full include repeatedly starting to drink their bottle and then stopping, becoming easily distracted, or falling asleep. It is important for educators to pay attention to these cues. This helps keep the babies in their care satisfied and happy!

Between 4 and 6 months most babies are ready to add solid foods to their diet, while continuing with breast milk or formula. The AAP lists the following as signs that a baby may be ready for solid food: they can hold their head up independently, they open their mouth when they see food near them, and they are able to move food from a spoon to the back of their mouth. This would be a great time to have a conference with parents to discuss their expectations. This will help provide a consistent experience for the babies.

Family-Style Dining in Early Childhood Settings

A great way to engage young children in healthy eating habits is through family-style dining. Children as young as one year can participate! In family-style dining, the children help set the table, serve themselves, and help clean up after. Educators are encouraged to sit at the table and eat with the children. Initially, educators may need to help children with portion sizes, especially with toddlers. After some time, children will learn to serve themselves according to how hungry they feel.

Family-style dining gives educators a chance to engage the children in conversation. This is a great opportunity to practice turn-taking in conversation. Educators can also model proper table manners for the children. Family-style dining creates a community atmosphere, which may help to encourage children to try some new foods.



Family-Style Dining in Early Childhood Settings (con't)

In the beginning, family-style dining may feel a bit difficult. It will take time for children to adjust to the new routine. There will likely be lots of spills! Be sure to use child-sized serving dishes and utensils to help support them with this new skill. Consistency will help the children adjust quickly. Give them lots of praise and lots of patience!

Hands-On Learning

There are many ways to support children's nutrition using hands-on activities. We know from research that children learn best when they are actively involved in activities. Below are two ideas to get children involved in healthy eating!

Gardening- Gardening is a great way to introduce different fruits and vegetables to children. Preschool and school age children can be involved in the entire gardening process! Educators can set up a traditional garden in their outdoor space or use raised garden beds. Allow children to vote on which fruits and vegetables to grow. Involve children in the planting and care of your classroom garden. Be sure to use the fruits and vegetables from the garden in your program's meals and snacks. This is a great way to encourage children to try new fruits and vegetables. They may have more of an interest in trying the things that they helped to grow!

Cooking- Most children are naturally curious about cooking! There are many recipes that are suitable for children. As with gardening, children are more likely to try something new if they were involved in the process. Keep in mind that there are plenty of recipes that do not involve using a stove. Check out our resources below for some cooking ideas! Think about ways to focus on nutrition in your programs.

We would love to hear about what your program is doing in our Coach's Corner Facebook group!



Resources

- Healthy Lifestyles Supplemental Curriculum List- Delaware Stars Website
- Research-based Mealtime Hacks for Picky Eaters- <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2983-research-based-mealtime-hacks-for-picky-eaters>
- Family-Style Dining in Child Care Settings- <https://www.virtuallabschool.org/focused-topics/food-service/lesson-2>
- How Does Your Garden Grow?- http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=583
- Family-Style Dining Tips- <https://healthykidshealthyfuture.org/links/tips-for-family-style-dining/>
- Cool Cooking for Kids- http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=541
- Cooking with Preschoolers- <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/cooking-preschool.html>

Professional Development

- o Healthy Together: Teaching Nutrition and Healthy Living to Preschool Children
- o Preventing Obesity and Promoting Wellness in Early Childhood Settings- Online
- o Infant Feeding in Child Care- Online
- o Sprouting Healthy Habits- Online