

Eating and Food Behaviors of Young Children

Children learn food habits and behaviors at an early age. From birth until about age five or six, children are laying down the nutrition foundation that will be with them for the rest of their lives. Role modeling healthy eating habits to the children in your care is just as important as providing nutritious meals and snacks to them. What you say and do can have a lifelong effect on their health. It's important to let the children see you eat (and enjoy!) what you are serving them. Below are some eating and food behaviors of young children to keep in mind when planning and serving meals and snacks to young children.

Toddlers (1–2 year olds):

- Physical growth begins to slow down a bit, and appetite may begin to decrease.
- Eating patterns are not consistent; what they like today, they may not like tomorrow. It is important to provide three meals a day with planned snacks in between.
- Although interested in food, they may not eat every item at a meal like an adult. They may only eat one or two foods.
- Feeding skills with hands, chewing, and cup-drinking improve. It is important to provide child-sized seating, plates, cups, bowls, and utensils.
- They are capable of eating until they are full and stopping when they are full, unless we teach them differently.
- Because of their increasing independence, they know what they want to do and what they don't want to do.
- They are learning to communicate verbally.
- Toddlers may be fearful of trying new things. It may take over 20 times of introducing a new food before they feel comfortable enough to actually swallow it.

Preschoolers (3–5 year olds):

- Language skills improve.
- Feeding skills continue to improve.

- They are full of energy, they like starting things; however, attention span and the need to finish are limited.
- Preschoolers are full of fun; playing is their job.
- They are eager to please, they want to learn and get better at whatever they do including table manners and learning about food.
- They copy adults. Your praise, criticism, support, and discipline become more important.
- They are more independent. Instead of learning by trial and error, preschoolers think ahead, talk about something, and study it. Although not as skeptical of new foods, it will still take a lot of tastes.

Understand, observe, and maintain Ellyn Satter's "division of responsibility." Child care providers and "parents are responsible for the what, when, and where of feeding. Children are responsible for the how much and whether of eating."

