

Encourage Healthy Habits

It is estimated that one in five children are overweight. Children who are overweight are at high risk of becoming overweight and obese adults and developing weight-related chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes. The number of children diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes alone has doubled in Florida in the last ten years. As child care professionals, we have the daily responsibility of serving healthy meals and encouraging physical activity for the children in our care.

Beginning at age 2, children should get most of their calories from grain products, fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, beans, lean meat, poultry, and fish. Be alert when serving food to small children. Avoid foods that are choking hazards, for example, whole grapes, hot dogs, peanuts, raisins, and baby carrots. Children may be tempted to swallow larger pieces of food whole, so offer food to children in smaller pieces that can be easily chewed.

Children need enough food for proper growth, but too many calories and too little physical activity lead them to become overweight. Children need at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Encourage children to be physically active by jumping rope, playing tag, riding a bike or tricycle, etc.

Children learn by example. Be a role model for children. The following are ways to model healthy nutrition and physical activity.

- Respect a child's decision for knowing if he or she is hungry or full.
- Place no special merit on dessert if offered.
- Schedule meals and snacks.
- Provide something other than food for comfort or reward.
- Set limits on TV watching (1 to 2 hours per day) and turn off during meals.
- Be aware of portion sizes.
- Sit down and eat with children.
- Provide a variety of foods.
- Once a child turns 2 years of age, replace whole milk with lowfat or fat free milk.
- Establish regular physical activities for children.
- Eat the same food the children eat.
- Participate in physical activity together.

Another way to help children develop healthy eating habits is to make eating exciting for them. Try some of these fun ideas that were shared by child care providers in Florida:

- Have theme days and plan menus accordingly:
 - Have a Cultural Day and serve only foods found in that particular culture.
 - Have a Round Day and explore round foods. Lunch could include round items like sweet and sour meatballs, green peas, blueberries, roll, and milk. **BE CAUTIOUS OF FOODS THAT MAY BE A CHOKING HAZARD.** See *Planning Healthy Menus* companion booklet for ways to prevent choking.
- Try serving food in a new way:
 - Make a meatloaf cake. Bake meat loaf in two cake pans. Use mashed potatoes as icing. “Ice” between the two layers, the sides and top of the “cake.” Decorate the “cake” with ketchup flowers.
 - Jazz up oatmeal with jelly and let the children make swirls or add raisins, cinnamon, and milk.
 - Encourage children to drink lowfat or fat free milk by flavoring it with chocolate or strawberry or a touch of food coloring.
 - Read Dr. Suess’s *Green Eggs and Ham* and serve eggs that have been tinted green and scrambled with diced ham.
- Encourage vegetables and fruits:
 - Everything is better with dip! Serve new vegetables and fruits next to old favorites with lowfat dip. Try cutting vegetables and fruits into new shapes—cucumber spears instead of rounds, radish wedges that look like mini apples, etc.
- One day a week have an activity snack. Choose snacks that children can make/assemble. This is also a great way to introduce new foods, since children are more likely to try new foods when they are involved in the process of preparation.
 - Make houses out of slices of whole grain bread. Cut one slice of bread in half into triangles. Lay one whole slice of bread flat on a plate and place the triangle flat on the plate above the square slice. Decorate the “house” with cheese slices, scoopable salads and vegetables.
 - Serve fruit kabobs. Set out bowls of fruit that have been cut into bite-sized pieces. Let children make their own fruit kabobs using plastic stir straws as the skewers.
 - See other ideas for activity snacks in the *Snacks, Desserts and Extras* section of this book.