

FEEDING YOUR 2 TO 6 YEAR OLD CHILD

By Jill West, RD, CDE

Your child is standing in the kitchen demanding macaroni and cheese for dinner for the fifth day in a row! It is very common for children aged 2 to 6 years old to have unpredictable and unusual eating behaviors. Sometimes it is their way of showing independence or needing consistency and repetition in their lives. Sometimes it is just the way it is. The good news is that studies show kids can and do get the calories and nutrients they need over time when they are allowed to make their own food choices from a variety of healthy foods. They have internal signals of hunger, satiety, and nutrient needs that guide them. They can regulate what, how much and when to eat...really! The bottom line is that mealtimes are meant to be pleasant, enjoyable family times and should provide healthy choices to support healthy growth and development. So how can we help to make it that way?

Who is responsible for what?

Parents and children have different responsibilities in the eating process. The parent decides **what** will be served and **when** the meal or snack will be served, as well as what the standards of behavior will be at the table. As a parent, your job is to provide varied, nutritionally balanced, tasty meals and snacks.

Your child's responsibility is to decide **what and how much** will be eaten. A child should not be forced to eat every food or "clean the plate"; nor should food be used as a reward. These habits can be harmful to the child's future eating behaviors.

If you offer meal or snack choices (this sometimes helps prevent becoming a short-order cook!), I recommend no more than 2 specific options. For example, "Do you want a turkey sandwich or a grilled cheese sandwich?" A child can become overwhelmed by too many choices or lack of specific alternatives, making it difficult to decide or causing the child to choose the same item every time. Another strategy is to prepare the same meal for the whole family. If a child refuses to eat, he or she has one

other choice that is always the same alternative (i.e. cottage cheese and fruit or milk and toast). Remember, your child will not starve if he/she refuses to eat a meal. As a parent you are not responsible for how much a child eats, whether he eats, or how her body turns out.

What does my child need to be healthy?

In general, children 2 years and older should follow the same heart healthy guidelines as adults. However, no foods should be entirely eliminated from a child's diet, unless you have been told to do so by a doctor or registered dietitian. Even high fat foods eaten occasionally can be balanced with low fat choices to make a healthy diet. Children have higher calorie and nutrient needs than adults for proper growth and development, so they will utilize the extra calories.

The **appropriate portion size** for children ages 2-6 is usually 1/4 to 1/3 an adult portion. On average, that equals about one tablespoon of each type of food per year of age. For example, a 3 year old should be served about 3 tablespoons chicken, 3 tablespoons rice, 3 tablespoons fruit or vegetable at dinner. Small portions are less overwhelming to a child and, therefore, more likely to be eaten. Additional servings can always be provided as needed.

Because children's stomachs are small they usually feel full quickly, making snacks essential for most children. Snacks allow adequate intake while allowing the child to decide how much to eat and when he is hungry. It is best to avoid large snacks or liquids other than water as mealtime approaches to prevent a child filling up before the meal is served.

Young children prefer foods that are raw and/or crunchy over soft, hot foods. They often will choose finger foods, instead of food requiring utensils when there is an option. By keeping this in mind meals can sometimes be tailored to these preferences. For example, serve breaded

The Young Child's Food Guide

A child's choices probably will not match the chart every day. Think about the foods your child eats over several days and compare it to the daily food guide below.

Fruits & Vegetables

5 or more

fresh, canned, cooked or raw juice (limit)

Breads, Cereals & Grains

7 or more

crackers, tortillas, noodles, rice, bread, oatmeal, cereal

Milk Products

2 or more

milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, cheese

Protein Foods

2 (3 to 4 ounces daily)

beans, tofu, fish, chicken, egg, pork, beef

chicken, which has a crunchy crust, instead of baked chicken with a sauce.

Beware of foods that are choking hazards for children less than 4 years old. Nuts, seeds, whole grapes, popcorn, raisins, candies the size of peas, frozen peas, or hot dogs are not recommended because the airway of young children is very small. These foods do not dissolve and can get lodged in the throat if the child coughs or laughs. **IT IS NOT WORTH THE RISK!** Some foods, such as carrots or grapes, can be cut into thin slivers so that the child's airway is larger than the piece of food, allowing air to pass through if the food were inhaled.

What does it mean to be healthy?

Along with helping your child eat healthy foods, it is equally important to help in developing healthy good attitudes and habits. Below is a list of ideas to try:

- Involve your child in menu planning, setting the table, shopping, and meal preparation.
- Allow your child to assemble left-overs and help him microwave it.
- Talk about healthy foods instead of emphasizing unhealthy choices. Try not to label foods "good" and "bad," which can create judgments, guilt, and many negative perceptions toward food.
- Emphasize moderation of choices and portions.
- At preschool age, children begin to mimic the eating habits of those around them. Thus, the whole family

- need to be role models for healthy eating and activity.
- As a parent eat healthy foods yourself, including 1 to 1 1/2 cups of vegetables and 2-3 fruits daily.
- Teach and reinforce proper table manners.
- Allow your child to eat at his own pace.
- When introducing a new food, serve it to the whole family and do not pressure or reward the child for trying or eating it.
- Present a new food at the beginning of meal when the child is hungriest, and serve a small portion.
- When a food has been rejected, periodically re-try it. Research shows it may take 10 times before a child will try or eat a new food. Also, children's tastes change over time, so the once rejected green beans may be accepted a year or two later--KEEP TRYING!
- Turn the television off during meal and snack times. Children are easily distracted by TV and may not eat adequately. Full attention needs to be on eating.

By providing nutritionally balanced meals and snacks and by fostering healthy food attitudes and behaviors, you will promote enjoyable family mealtimes and decrease your stress immensely.

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