

Quenching Thirst: Healthy Drink Choices for Young Children

Choosing healthy drinks is an important consideration for parents and caregivers. Healthy drinks provide nutrition and hydration; unhealthy drinks can lead to childhood obesity, dental decay and anemia.

Developmental skills and drinking

By about 12 months infants should be drinking from a cup and weaned from a bottle. Infants who continue to breastfeed also need to drink from a cup as the frequency of breastfeeding gradually decreases.

1-year-olds need help to hold a cup and regulate flow. This can be a messy process! Avoid sippy cups since they promote intermittent sipping which can lead to oral health problems.

2-year-olds have the arm muscle strength and coordination to hold a cup and will experience fewer spills.

3-year-olds are developing hand muscles and can manage different sizes and shapes of cups. Introduce self-help skills such as pouring from a small pitcher.

4-year-olds can use finger muscles, have more self help skills and can drink from a drinking fountain. Teach sanitary drinking fountain skills.

Healthy drink choices

Milk. Milk is important for bone growth. Children who are 1–2 years of age should drink 16 ounces of whole milk per day. At age two, switch to low fat milk. (AAP)

Can a young child drink too much milk? Yes! More than 24 ounces of milk per day puts a young child at risk for iron deficiency anemia, which can cause intellectual and behavior problems. Children who drink too much milk

may not have an appetite for the other foods they need for growth and development. Young children need a varied diet that includes sources of iron.

Water. Active and thirsty children need water. Make sure water is available. Consider installing and maintaining a drinking fountain or provide a cooler of water in outside play areas.

Drink less sugar. Limit juice to one 4–6 ounce serving of 100% fruit juice per day (most juice boxes are 8 ounces.) Sugary fruit drinks and soda add calories that have no nutritional value. Drinking soda and other sweetened drinks is linked to obesity and dental decay in children. No juice for infants under 6 months and never put soda or juice in a bottle. (AAP)

Keep children well hydrated

Fluids help with digestion, thinking and energy. Offer plenty of fluids; especially water, to help children stay well hydrated. This is especially important when the weather is warm, children are getting vigorous exercise or recovering from illness.

Marketing and children

The marketing of soft drinks is often aimed at children. Many food and drink manufacturers will use favorite movie or cartoon characters to promote their products. Since children can't tell the difference between TV shows and advertisements they usually don't understand that advertisements are trying to sell products. Be media savvy!

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Resources and References:

AAP, The Use and Misuse of Fruit Juice in Pediatrics, PEDIATRICS, 2001.

APP, Calcium—Get What You Need at www.aap.org/patiented/calciumneed.htm.

CCHP, Good Nutrition and Healthy Smiles, www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org/pdfs/factsheets/nutritionsmilesen1105.pdf.

CCHP, Nutrition and Activity for Young Children, www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org/pdfs/healthandsafety/NutritionEN032707_adr.pdf.



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