



Nutrition and Activity for Young Children: Raising Physically Fit and Well Nourished Children

Childhood obesity trends

Over the past two decades, the number of obese and overweight children has doubled. For the first time ever, the current generation of young children may have shorter life spans than their parents. Considering the many health problems associated with obesity, it is important for parents, teachers and caregivers to take measures to reverse this troubling situation.

Factors contributing to childhood obesity

Diets consisting of processed convenience foods that are high in calories, fat and salt have become the norm for many families. Fast foods and super sized meals provide more calories and less nutrition than children need. As serving sizes have increased, so has the obesity rate. Meal patterns have also changed; fewer meals are prepared at home and eaten as a family. At the same time, our children have become more sedentary. Electronic media have, in many cases, taken the place of outdoor active play. Many children spend several hours a day behind one screen or another. In addition, the school day has become less active. With pressures to excel in academics, less time is spent on physical fitness. Fewer children walk to school and many children are driven everywhere they go.

Fortunately, Early Care and Education (ECE) programs are in a key position to promote change. An environment and routine that respect children's needs for good food and healthy activity will benefit children now and for a lifetime.

Healthy food habits for young children

Breastfeeding

An infant's first food should be breast milk. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) believes

that breastfeeding is the optimal source of nutrition through the first year of life and recommends exclusively breastfeeding for the first six months. Encourage breastfeeding in your program whenever possible.

First Foods

At about six months, it is recommended that infants start on solid food. The first should be iron-fortified cereal. Healthy brain development depends on dietary iron. Offering a variety of iron rich foods such as leafy green vegetables, fruits and grains without added sugars or salt is a healthy start. Round, firm foods such as whole grapes are a choking hazard. Completely chop all table foods for young children. (AAP)

Feeding styles of parents and caregivers

Research shows that caregiver feeding styles affect the development of children's eating habits. A child centered feeding style has the best outcomes. This style allows children to choose among appropriate foods that are offered. Children benefit when caregivers and parents discuss food with the them, arrange food to make it interesting, respect preferences that a child might have and allow children to stop eating when they feel full. It is very important that children learn to pay attention to internal cues of feeling hungry and feeling full.

Feeding styles should not be "permissive" (allowing children to consume any food or drink in any amount, at any time). Nor should caregivers be "authoritarian." An authoritarian style shows disapproval when the child does not eat, warns the child that food will be taken away if not eaten, begs the child to eat, and/or uses food as a reward, comfort or incentive. Most young children prefer familiar foods. A child may need to be offered a food many times before trying it. Try not to be discouraged

by this, and continue to offer a variety of healthy choices.

Family style meals

When children eat in a group in ECE programs, they see others enjoying food and are more likely to try new foods. Teachers have the opportunity to role model healthy eating and meaningful conversations with children. Mealtime is not a time for TV, reading books or playing with toys. Make extended conversation the focus of your mealtime. Involve children in planning meals, setting the table and preparing food.

Drinks and milk

Consuming soft drinks is associated with obesity in children. Young children should only be offered milk, water, and limited amount of fruit juice. AAP recommends that fruit juice not be given to infants under six months of age. For children age one to six, limit fruit juice to small servings (4 to 6 ounces/day) of 100% fruit juice. Never put soft drinks or juice in a bottle. Too much milk should also be avoided, as it can lead to a reduced intake of iron rich foods and iron deficiency. For children under age two, limit milk to 24 ounces of whole milk per day; at age two, change to low fat or skim milk. (AAP)

Healthy activity for young children

Daily schedule

Plan more time for active play. According to the National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), young children need both structured and unstructured physical activity every day and should not be still for more than 60 minutes at a time unless they are asleep. Children are naturally active and curious. For most children, it is harder to sit still than be active. Encourage these natural traits!

Arrangement of space, equipment and materials

Create an environment that supports the development of gross motor skills. Infants and toddlers need to be able to explore their environment in safe settings that do not restrict movement. Provide “tummy time” for infants who sleep on their backs.

Active outdoor play

Encourage vigorous outdoor play. Note that this requires active adult supervision. Most injuries in

child care settings happen outdoors. Maintain a safe environment and appropriate staffing rather than limiting outdoor play for fear of injury.

Include physical skill building in your curriculum. Young children who learn physical skills such as jumping, running, throwing and catching will have the foundation to participate in physical activities and sports as older children. Remember that physical skills may come easily to some children while others may need more adult guidance. Research shows that preschool children who have a foundation of physical skills will participate more fully in elementary school sports. Look for ideas to increase physical skills at www.pecentral.org and <http://fitsource.nccic.acf.hhs.gov/fitsource>

Work with parents

Many working families struggle with hurried schedules. They often rely on inexpensive fast foods and TV or video games to keep their children occupied. Many have long commutes to work. Be sensitive to this situation. Include parents in your efforts to improve nutrition and activities by providing resources, ideas and opportunities for active family fun.

More tips for your program:

- Have a policy that fundraisers and celebrations will focus on nonfood or healthy food items.
- Replace food rewards with a special privilege or sticker.
- Provide a clean drinking fountain.
- Work to improve local parks and recreation.

by Bobbie Rose

References and Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics Web Site at www.aap.org

Strategic Alliance ENACT at www.preventioninstitute.org/enact/childcare/index.html

Hughs, Sheryl et al, The Benefits of Authoritative Feeding Styles, *Appetite*, 2005

Active Start, Physical Activity Guidelines for Children Birth to Five Years, 2002, NASPE