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“Strategies for Feeding a Preschooler”

www.kidshealth.org

During the preschool years, your child will emerge as an individual. No longer a toddler, he or she is less likely to throw a tantrum and should be more willing to cooperate - children of this age want to please their parents. Preschoolers also want to do things themselves, but they are willing to learn from mom and dad. This give-and-take creates opportunities for parents to teach kids about healthy food choices in new and exciting ways.

A balanced diet gives children the nutrients necessary for optimal growth and development, and the energy for the exploration they want to do. Through eating right and playing a lot, preschoolers can maintain a healthy weight and stay energized as they get ready for the next big step in their young lives: kindergarten.

The Parent's Role

Guiding a child's eating habits is delicate work. You want to encourage your child to make good choices, but without hovering or pestering. You should take charge by presenting mostly healthy foods, but you don't want to teach your child that certain foods are "bad." You want your preschooler to eat enough nutritious food, but you don't want to start negotiating the number of bites of dinner that must be eaten to get dessert. These approaches don't work, and may even make it more likely that a child will consume too many calories.

At a parent's request, a preschooler may be willing to try new foods - especially if mom and dad are eating the same thing. There's nothing wrong with serving foods you know your child likes, but they shouldn't always be on the menu. Serve a variety of foods and don't cater to a child's limited palate. Don't fall into the trap of fixing a meal specifically for your child that is different from your own - before you know it, you will be fixing two dinners every night.

It may seem illogical but it's better to present a range of foods, even if your child sometimes refuses to eat anything on the plate. It's normal to want your child to eat at dinner, but it's also important to know that skipping one meal will not harm a healthy child. Let the child know food will be available at the next regular meal or snack time - and not before then.

Parents can take these additional steps to encourage a well-rounded diet:

- Continue offering a variety of foods, even ones the child has rejected in the past.
- Keep healthy foods in the house and limit the availability of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods.

- Involve children in meal preparation - for example; let them tear lettuce for a salad or help set the table.
- Create a structure for daily meals and snacks, so the child doesn't graze all day long.
- Have regular family meals and make them pleasant times for the whole family to get together.
- Set a good example by eating a nutritious diet yourself.

Letting Kids Have Some Control

Parents may feel uneasy about giving preschoolers control over how much they eat. But it's a limited kind of control. The parent is responsible for setting the schedule for meals and snacks and deciding which foods to serve. A child of 4 shouldn't be getting his or her own snacks but can be given a choice and allowed to decide whether to eat or not.

Preschoolers are old enough to begin understanding the concept of being full, known as **satiety**. Kids who stop eating when they feel full are less likely to become overweight. Most children naturally know if they are hungry or full and they can use these cues to properly control their food intake. Children who are encouraged to ignore these cues may learn to override this internal control mechanism.

If your child chooses not to eat at a scheduled meal or snack time, try to avoid arguing about it or criticizing the child. Staying neutral and calm will prevent the more vexing problems that can arise when parents and children battle over food.