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**Choosy Eaters Can Become Healthy Eaters, Too!**



CACFP 2 hour Nutrition Training 2019/2020

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Resources:

University of Illinois Extension (2019 Conference)

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In 2002, a large percentage of preschool children with employed mothers were in full-time care each week. Forty-two percent of children under age 5 with employed mothers spent at least 35 hours a week in childcare. The proportion is even greater (50.6 percent) among children whose mothers worked full-time. These findings reinforce the important role that childcare plays in the lives of America's youngest children.



Whilethere are guidelines to optimize dietary intake of children attending childcare on an average fifty-five percent of calories are consumed while in childcare.

Why Does This Matter?

Childcare providers have more influence over child food preferences than their parents do.

Children are all different types of eaters. A lot of effort and stress goes into making sure that children eat nutritiously. So much that many times, the pleasure of having a meal together never takes place. Your

position as childcare educator sometimes puts you in the middle between parent expectations and the child development and temperament. How best to help a child with fussy eating tendencies begin to accept new foods is a challenge for both parents and providers.

Eating is a learned behavior. Babies get hungry, but unlike the instinct to suck, eating takes practice! In addition, all children have different temperaments, which greatly influence what type of eater they will be.

What is Choosy Eating?

* Fussy, faddy, or picky eating
* There is no concise definition
* Parents tend to use two main characteristics to describe their choosy eater
* Unwilling to try new foods
* Consuming a limited type and amount of food

What is Choosy Eating?

* Peak age for choosy eating is between 2-3 years of age’
* Tactile sensitivity may play a role in food acceptance; i.e. slimy or mushy, tough foods that require chewing
* An increase in anxiety over food

Several characteristics make up our temperaments, such as:

**Activity levels -** Children with lower activity levels may eat less than those who are high-energy children. Best practice is to encourage a child to self-regulate food intake based on recognizing feelings of hunger and fullness. Based on individual growth, all children will be hungrier some days versus other days. A child needs to learn to

identify and trust feeling hungry and feeling full. The adults in the child’s life needs to do the same!

**Moods -** Children have different types of moods that can range from outgoing to shy. Shy children may be less likely to try any new experience from meeting new people to trying new foods. A shy child may need many introductions to a new food versus a more adventurous type child. Many young children need to become familiar with new foods by seeing 10-15 times before trying.

**Emotions -** Children’s natural emotion type can range from easy-going too stubborn. Some children cry more than others cry and take longer to soothe. Involving all children in menu planning and meal preparation will especially help the more stubborn types. Giving 2 or 3 choices of a food group, such as saying today we can have either broccoli or green beans gives a sense of power to children while accomplishing the goal of picking a vegetable.

**Flexibility & Adaptability -** Children have different levels of flexibility. Some children adapt easily to change, but many young children need more notice of transitions from activity to mealtime. Making sure, you have plenty of time for the meal and establishing pre-meal time routines, such as handwashing and setting the table help, children anticipate the transition.

**Approach and withdrawal -** Children are bold or cautious...or somewhere in between. If your child is more

cautious about new situations and people, she may be more cautious about new foods. Best practice is to plan at least one component of familiar or well-accepted food with a new food in a meal.

**Persistence -** Children vary in the length of time they will continue an activity in the face of obstacles without giving up. We all can become frustrated, but the adult must summon up lots of patience to keep serving healthy foods without pressure. Love and acceptance of the child’s ability is the key, not insisting that a child continue to

the point of frustration.

**Distractibility -** Children can have very short attention spans, but some young children cannot sit still for very long and are easily distracted usually by visual or auditory stimuli. Best practice is to completely unplug for meal times. No phones, tablets, TV and do not expect long meal times, know children’s attention limits.

**Regularity -** Children can be predictable or unpredictable in terms of appetite and sleep. Some children are very regulated in when they get hungry or tired. Other children do not settle easily into regular sleep and eating patterns. Living with an unpredictable young child can be challenging and adults need patience to help children become

as regular as possible.

**Sensory threshold -** Children may be quite sensitive to stimulation such as sounds, tastes, touch, and

temperature changes. A child having trouble with the feel of their clothing or loud sounds may also be a fussy eater. In some cases of extreme fussy eating, work with an early intervention team, including a pediatric occupational therapist can help. Understanding a child’s temperament will help you adjust your mealtime environment and help children learn to accept new foods more readily. Eager eaters or picky eaters seen through the *lens of individual temperament,* makes meal times more about meeting the child’s needs and less about what we think a child should be eating.

**How do Kids Become Choosy?**

Reasons a child becomes a choosy eater:

* Pressure to eat
* Personality factors
* Parental practices/feeding styles
* Maternal food preferences

Provide Encouragement - Encourage children to try new or less favorite foods: i.e. *would you like to try some…Have you seen this food before…what do you like to eat…We all like different foods…*

**Eating from a child’s perspective!**

Providers and parents have long noticed that young children tend to love starchy and/or sweet foods, often describing what children choose to eat as the “white” or “beige” diet because of the common tendency to avoid anything green! Seems there is some science to explain what is going on.

**Sweetness Signals Safe Energy -** *When it is time to eat, I know you want me to eat the protein and veggies– but the sweet and starchy foods just feel safer to me. I might want to try some of the other foods eventually, but these foods are safe and satisfy.*

What is behind it: Young children prefer sweet over bitter as it signals a safe source of energy. Breast milk is sweet, confirming a link between sweet taste and safe energy. The preference for sweetness changes with age. In one study, school age children, teenagers, and adults were given a taste test with different sucrose concentrations.

The school age children preferred the higher sweet concentrations than teenagers did, but teenagers preferred higher sweet intensities than adults did. This is consistent with other studies that show that sweet preferences decline when growth is complete.

**It is Brain Food –** *I know you look at me funny when I am perfectly content with eating bread and crackers at meals and snacks. I do not want to hear how I ate everything when I was a baby. My body and growth feels different now. Someday I will want more food combinations, but this plain old starchy food just hits the spot.*

What is behind it: Researchers from Northwestern University looked at the energy needs of the brain from birth to adulthood. Using MRI and PET scan data, they discovered that glucose uptake by the brain does not peak at birth but during the slower period growth between infancy and puberty. Researchers believe that this longer period of energy requirements (glucose) going to the brain evolved so that the unique human brain can fully develop in key processes like synaptic growth. The brain relies heavily on glucose, which is why a child’s brain uses twice as much glucose as an adult brain. Brain glucose requirements peak at about 5 years of age. This may be why preschoolers and young school age children are drawn to starchy foods like pasta, bread, and crackers that easily metabolize into glucose for the developing brain.

Increase Food Exposure:

* Offer new foods often, one food at a time
* Make them look appealing
* Pair unpopular or unfamiliar items with popular/familiar foods
* A bite or two is just fine, don’t force a full portion

Use the Five Senses

 Sight  Smell  Touch

 Sound  Taste

Polite Tasters

* Just a taste
* Start with the eager
* Positive words and expressions
* Don’t have to swallow
* It’s okay to not taste
* Offer again and again

**What to Expect When Feeding Children**

**Ages 6 months to 2 years**

Accepts most foods, even when an infant makes a funny face!

Hungry— accelerated growth during this age!

Honeymoon phase of feeding because child is open to eat to satisfy growth!

**Best Practice:** Introduce a variety of tastes, textures and flavors. No need to avoid spices and seasonings. Have fun trying

**Ages 2 to 5 years**

Drops some previously accepted foods and becomes wary of unfamiliar foods.

Appetite becomes erratic—growth is slowing. Keep portion sizes small.

Demands more control over food choices

**Best Practice:** Do not make special meals or force child to eat. This stage is long but will not last forever. Keep trying new foods.

**Ages 6-12 years**

Tastes gradually expand.

Growth stable but increases as children hit puberty.

Food choices begin to reflect a desire to be like friends.

**Best Practice:** Get kids cooking. Work together to manage outside influences. Do not be a “food cop”.



ABOUT 12 – 15

Create a Positive Food Environment



Food should not be used to encourage positive behavior or during punishment! “*All of this can be yours if you sit quietly now and eat your vegetables at lunch….*



Ensure materials supporting good nutrition are visibly displayed throughout your family daycare. Use posters pictures books healthy food displays are projects container or on-sit garden!

 



Allow children’s input and to be involved. Eat together. Be a role model. Teach eating skills. Encourage children.

**Division of Responsibility in Feeding Children**

**The parent/provider is responsible for what, where, and when to eat.**

**The child is responsible for how much or whether to eat.**

The parent/provider’s jobs:

* Choose and prepare the food.
* Provide regular meals and snacks.
* Make mealtimes pleasant.
* Show children what they have to learn about food and mealtime behavior.
* Do not let children graze between meal and snack times.

Fundamental to the job of adults is trusting children to decide how much or whether to

eat. We know children sometimes don’t want to eat, or don’t want to eat what is served,

or are satisfied with a couple of bites. This is normal behavior. Patience and a nonjudgmental

attitude are essential.

If we do our jobs with feeding, children will do their job with eating:

* Children will eat.
* They will eat the amount they need.
* They will learn to eat the foods the childcare/family eats.
* They will grow predictably.
* They will learn to behave well enough at the table.

Children are interested and capable of eating and learning about foods. Children, like anyone, do not do well when pressured into eating by any means. A parent or educator must trust the child to know when he is full or hungry. Adults can help children learn to identify those feelings. No matter our good intentions, over-managing a child’s eating will often result in the exact opposite of what we want for the child.

**Benefits of Family Style Meal Service**

Family style meal service is encouraged by the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

Meals and snacks served family style are creditable even if the child chooses not to take some of a particular food after the serving dish is passed twice.

Children may choose to take a small portion of food, knowing that the food will still be available if they would like a second serving.

Serving themselves gives children time to practice skills like passing, pouring, and scooping foods.

Children practice taking turns, sharing, and politely turning down foods that are all part of table manners that are learned.

Seeing new foods and watching others serve themselves encourages children who are often unsure about new foods to be more interested in the meal.

**Family Style Meals in 5 Steps!**

1. *PREPARATION*

\* Involve children with meal set up EVERYDAY at EVERY MEALTIME.

1. *TRANSITION*

\* Create a routine for moving into and away from the meal.

1. *SERVING and EATING*

\*Set expectation that all children will serve themselves all food components. Providers encourage, but not force, children to try new foods. Children learn manners and enjoy conversation with friends and educators.

1. *USE THE POWER OF CHOICE*

\*Use serving bowls that contain enough food for everyone to have a first and second helping, if they want. Try having a small spoon and a bigger spoon to use for serving. You can ask

each child if they would like a small scoop or a big scoop. It is easier to “yes” when given a choice rather than asked, “Do you want some”?

1. *CLEAN-UP*

\*Teach children how to clear the table and where to put dirty dishes.

**Tips for Setting Good Examples**

As such an important influence in children’s lives, there are many things you can do that are fun and will help children develop healthy eating habits. These tips summarize ways we can encourage even the fussiest eater to become comfortable around new foods. Most importantly, we trust that children know what their bodies need. Cook together, eat together, talk together, and have mealtime = together time.

**Show by example!** Eat fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Let children see you snacking on raw vegetables, too.

**Get creative in the kitchen.** Cut food into easy shapes. Encourage your child to invent new snacks. Try “creating creature” snacks from different components, like veggies, cheese, and crackers.

**Offer the same foods for everyone!** Stop being a “short-order” cook. Always have at least one food that you know everyone likes.

**Reward with attention, not food.** Show your love with hugs. Choose not to offer sweets as rewards so that children do not think sweets or dessert foods are better than other foods.

**Focus on each other at the table.** Talk about fun and happy things at mealtimes. Turn off phones and TV. Make meals a stress-free time.

**Listen to the children.** If a child says she is not hungry, let her eat only as much as she wants. Offer limited choices. Ask “which would you like for lunch— broccoli or cauliflower?” instead of “Do you want broccoli for lunch?”

**Limit screen time.** Allow no more than 2 hours of TV a day, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

**Encourage physical activity.** Make physical activity fun for everyone. Involve the children in the planning. Play with the children instead of sitting on the sidelines. Set an example by being active.

**Be a good food role model!** Try new foods yourself. Describe its taste, texture and smell. Offer one new food at a time and serve something everyone likes along with a new food. Do not lecture or make a child eat.