

HEALTHY MEALS AND SNACKS

Learning to eat nutritious food begins in the early years. Emphasizing good nutrition at an early age will help get children on the track to a healthy lifestyle. Snacks and/or meals should be healthy and appealing. Following are some helpful hints in making children's snacks and meals nutritious, healthy, and fun:

1. Have children eat snacks or meals together in small groups. This helps the children to learn table manners such as taking turns, waiting until everyone has been served before eating, etc.
2. Make eating time pleasant. Create a positive atmosphere and encourage pleasant conversation.
3. Plan snacks or meals at appropriate times. Make sure children are rested. Overtired children will not eat much. Make sure children are fairly calm. Overactive children are not interested in eating. Forcing children to eat when they are tired or not interested in eating can create negative feelings toward food and snack or meal time.
4. Plan snacks or meals that the children can help prepare. Children are more interested in food they have helped to prepare. It is also a good time to emphasize many skills:
 - a. premath, as the children measure, cut, put together, and take apart
 - b. prereading, as the children read or look at a recipe to find the ingredients and the amount of each ingredient
 - c. social, as the children interact with a teacher/caregiver and take turns with other children
 - d. language, as the children communicate feelings, thoughts, and ideas as well as the what, how, and whys of the product they are preparing.
5. Limit distractions. Keep toys and other distractions away from the snack or meal table. Too many distractions make the children forget about eating.
6. Introduce one new type of food at a time. Do not make a big deal about serving a new food. Give small portions of unfamiliar foods at a time.
7. Serve interesting colors, shapes, and sizes. Fix tasty-looking food. It is surprising how creating a face, animal, or some kind of design out of carrots, a pineapple ring, raisins, and cottage cheese can entice a child who otherwise does not like those foods to suddenly eat and enjoy the foods.
8. Simplify eating; serve finger foods and bite-sized pieces.
9. Children prefer mildly seasoned foods, so use herbs, spices, salt, and pepper lightly.
10. Food should not be used as a reward or punishment. Do not force a child to eat a food because of misbehavior or offer treats for good behavior. Do not encourage eating for emotional satisfaction when children are happy or sad. This can begin a lifetime habit of overeating or not eating due to emotional stresses.
11. Serve snacks that are nutritious and healthy. Stay away from foods high in sugar, fat, and additives. Chocolate should be avoided. Provide fresh fruit, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, etc. There are many children's food recipe books on the market that are loaded with creative and nutritious snacks and dishes.