

Raising Healthy Children: Introducing New Foods to Your Preschooler¹

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About 17% (12.5 million) of children and teenagers in the United States are obese according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2013). This number has tripled since 1980 (CDC, 2013). Teaching children to try a variety of nutritious foods can play an important role in helping them develop good eating habits that will promote a healthy body weight and good health throughout their lives. This publication discusses different ways to encourage children to try and accept new foods.



Figure 1. Credits: Digital Vision

Variety is Key!

One of the main messages of *MyPlate for Preschoolers* is to offer a variety of foods to your child from each of the five food groups—Grains, Vegetables, Fruits, Dairy, and Protein Foods (USDA, 2012).

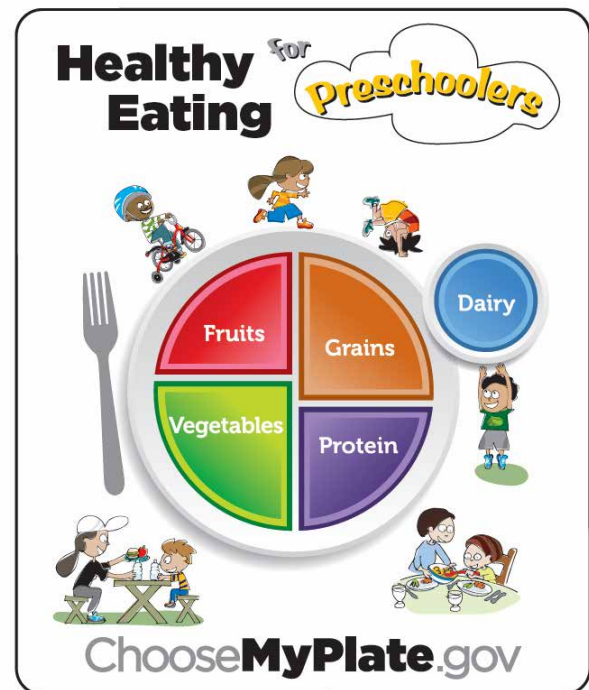


Figure 2. Credits: USDA

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Eating a variety of foods from all the food groups helps preschoolers meet their needs for different nutrients. Nutrients commonly found in foods from one group may not be present in high amounts in another. That is why eating a variety of foods is important. Learning to eat different foods within each food group is not only healthy, but it can also be fun for you and your child (USDA, 2012).

It is normal for young children to reject foods they have never tried before. It is also common for children in this age group to prefer to eat the same foods every day. If the foods of choice are nutritious, continue to offer them along with other foods. Eventually your child will try other foods and learn to enjoy them too. The best way to encourage your preschooler to try new foods is to have them available. Above all, avoid power struggles. Children warm up slowly to new foods, and it can take 12 or more times of offering a new food before a young child learns to accept it (Ellyn Satter Institute, 2012). Be patient, offer new foods many times, and do not get upset if your child doesn't take to a new food right away. Getting upset just makes you and your child more frustrated (USDA, 2012; USDA, n.d.; Ellyn Satter Institute, 2012). If you are concerned about your child's diet, talk to your pediatrician or family doctor, and follow the recommendations in this publication.

Provide a Pleasant Setting

A child's eating environment may influence whether or not she will try new foods that you offer her*. Make mealtimes as pleasant and positive as you can. When eating dinner, turn off the TV so your child is not distracted and spend quality time talking with her. This is a great time to talk about the importance of trying new, healthy foods and to provide encouragement without making her feel pressured to eat (USDA, 2012; Ellyn Satter Institute, 2012).

Serving new, healthy foods is a great way to expand the number of foods your preschooler eats, and it can benefit the entire family (USDA, n.d.).

When offering new foods to your child, be a good role model by making sure that she sees you eating them. When your child sees you eating them, she will be more likely to try them too!

Tips to Get Your Child to Try New Foods

Although every child is different, the simple tips listed below may help you get your child to try new foods.

- Make them available! Keep healthy foods in areas children can easily reach and in sizes, shapes, and textures right for their age. Examples include cut-up fruits, such as apple slices and grapes (sliced vertically to avoid choking), or vegetables, such as celery and carrot sticks. You can find more information about age-appropriate foods in the "Raising Healthy Children" series of articles, available at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_series_raising_healthy_children.
- Model good behavior. Kids tend to eat the same foods and in the same manner as their parents. Let your child see you trying and enjoying healthy new foods (USDA, n.d.).
- Let your child pick out new foods at the grocery store. Children are more likely to try a food if they make the selection. Head to the produce section and let your child suggest a new fruit or vegetable to purchase. Also let them help pick what you serve at the table and teach them to serve themselves by taking small amounts of each food at first (USDA, 2012; Ellyn Satter Institute, 2012).
- Eat more meals as a family. Eating together in a relaxed, pleasant setting will likely increase the number of healthy foods your child will eat (Ellyn Satter Institute, 2012).
- Let your child try small portions of new foods before serving them a full portion at mealtime.
- Don't offer multiple new foods at one time. This can be overwhelming for your child. Serving foods that you know your child already enjoys along with one new food may help encourage her to try the new food.
- Remember, all children are different. Some prefer their foods to be served plain and have each food separated on their plate. Others enjoy trying new foods when they are



Figure 3. Credits: © Rayes

mixed with familiar items such as a casserole dish. Listen to your child and find out what works best for her.

Summary

Introducing new foods to preschoolers takes time and patience. Showing your child that you like the food, telling her about the food, and giving her many chances to become familiar with new foods can help make feeding more relaxing for you and your preschooler. Remember to avoid pressuring her to eat, and try to make mealtime a relaxing and positive experience. Following these tips should make feeding your preschooler a variety of healthy foods easier.

**Although we refer to a female child in this document, the recommendations apply to all children.*

For More Information

To get more information about feeding your preschooler, contact one of the following reliable sources in your county:

- UF/IFAS Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator (look in the blue pages of your telephone book). UF/IFAS Extension offices are listed at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>.
- WIC nutritionist at your county health department (also in the blue pages of your telephone book).
- For referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area, call the Florida Dietetic Association at (850) 386-8850 or check the yellow pages of your phone book.

Recommended Reading

Patrick, H., & Nicklas, T.A. (2005). A review of family and social determinants of children's eating patterns and diet quality. *J Am Coll Nutr.* 24:83–92.

Satter, E. (2000). *Child of mine: Feeding with love and good sense* (3rd ed.). Palo Alto, California: Bull Publishing Company.

Satter, E. (1987). *How to get your kid to eat...but not too much*. Boulder, Colorado: Bull Publishing Company.

Recommended Websites

- USDA, ChooseMyPlate.gov. Health and Nutrition Information for Preschoolers. Available at <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers.html>.
- Ellyn Satter Institute. Childhood Feeding Problems. Available at <http://www.ellynsatter.com/how-to-feed-i-24.html>.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2013). *Obesity and extreme obesity rates decline among low-income preschool children*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>

Ellyn Satter Institute. (2012). *The picky eater*. Retrieved from <http://www.ellynsatter.com/>

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). (2012). *Healthy eating for preschoolers*. Retrieved from <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/healthyeatingforpreschoolers-miniposter.pdf>

USDA. (n.d.) *Picky eating: Help them try new foods*. Retrieved from <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/picky-eaters/new-foods.html>