

# NUTRITION BEHAVIORS FOR CHILDREN

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As I think about promoting positive dietary behaviors in children, I have to look at my fourth-grade daughter's current eating habits. Her eating practices are being molded at this early stage in her life. Children learn at a young age what kinds of food adults around them eat. In trying to teach her about positive nutritional choices, I find myself selecting healthful foods for her, such as green beans, apples, oranges, and other fruits and vegetables, that are part of my own diet. Nutritional eating practices are learned behaviors, and it is important that we start molding these behaviors early in a child's life.

## Poor Health Habits

Our society has been extremely negligent in promoting positive eating behaviors in our children. Many studies have shown that poor diets and lack of physical activity together account for more than 300,000 premature deaths among adults each year. These poor health habits begin in our children. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the percentage of children who are overweight has more than doubled in the past 20 years, and more than 9 million children (15 percent) are seriously overweight. Studies have shown that obese children are more likely to become obese adults. As adults, they are at increased risk for many premature diseases.

Eating habits of children and young people in the United States are poor. Children make poor nutritional choices that put them at risk for health problems. Contrary to common misconceptions, children do not instinctively select the nutrients that they need for proper growth and development. If I allowed my daughter to select food instinctively, she would have a diet of candy, soda, and cookies—hardly a healthful diet.

Another common misconception is that children can handle a poor diet when they are young because they will burn off the Calories; this is a dangerous misconception. Although it is true that children are able to metabolize the extra Calories because of increased activity, the poor eating habits they develop in childhood will continue into adulthood and can be detrimental. Establishing good nutritional habits during childhood is critical because changing poor eating behaviors in adulthood is difficult. Think about your own nutritional habits. I challenge you to choose one nutritional habit that you would like to change and to spend one week trying to change that habit. You can probably guess that trying to change the habit would

be difficult. Now consider that if you had developed a more positive eating pattern as a child, you would most likely not need to make this behavior change as an adult.

## Poor Diets

Children would get the proper amount of nutrients if they could only learn proper eating habits. Contrary to common beliefs, children do not need vitamin and mineral supplements. Unless there is a medical reason for vitamin and mineral supplements, children receive all the nutrients they need through a balanced diet. Taking vitamin pills only seems to be an easy solution for making up the nutrients missed in a child's dietary intake.

On another note, did you know that pound per pound children need to consume more water than do adults? Children lose a greater percent of water through evaporation than adults. Therefore, children need to consume more water per pound of body weight than adults need to consume.

Even though adults have shown some improvement in their dietary patterns, our children's eating habits remain poor. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, more than 84 percent of children eat too much fat. Children on average consume about 40 percent of their calories from fat. Children are not consuming enough fruits and vegetables in their diet. The National Cancer Institute recommends that children consume five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. Only 20 percent of our children actually meet this recommendation. Did you know that 51 percent of our children eat less than one serving of fruit a day? Furthermore, fried potatoes account for a large proportion of the vegetables eaten by children.

Did you know that one in five students skips breakfast on a regular basis? Several research studies have found that not eating breakfast can affect children's intellectual performance in school. Even moderate malnutrition can have a long-term effect on how well a child performs in school. Several studies have reported that undernourished children become sick, miss school, and score lower on tests than do children who receive the proper amount of nourishment. Therefore, it is important for children to eat properly and not skip meals.

## Promoting Good Nutrition

What can we do as teachers to encourage our students to become better eaters? The opportunity to promote better eating habits is in front of us. We have a captive audience



to whom to promote good nutrition and also positive health behaviors. We as teachers need to develop a comprehensive scope and sequence for nutrition education. It is important to keep reinforcing positive eating behaviors at every grade level. Nutrition education involves more than just educating students about healthful eating. We need to help children learn skills, not just facts about nutrition. The USDA's *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005* is a good source for learning diet and lifestyle skills. In this document, you can find healthful activities and practices that students can actually put into practice.

Give children repeated opportunities to practice healthful eating. Practicing a positive health behavior enough times will usually make that behavior the norm for children, not the exception. Teaching children about nutrition is no different from teaching children math skills. If we want our children to excel in mathematics, we give them multiple

opportunities to practice math problems. The same holds true for developing positive eating practices. Practice, practice, practice!

### **Practicing Good Nutrition**

What types of activities can teachers do to promote positive nutritional practices in children? First of all, request healthful snacks for class parties. This will create a positive atmosphere for eating these kinds of foods. Give students many chances to taste foods low in fat, sodium, and added sugar and foods high in vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Also teach children how to make healthful choices in the school cafeteria or when packing their lunches. This promotes positive behaviors and keeps children involved in learning about nutrition. Emphasize the positive aspects of healthful eating rather than the harmful effects of unhealthy eating.

Finally, make nutrition education activities fun. Be creative with your activities, and try to show your students that learning can be fun. Nutrition education curricula resources exist and are readily available, often for free. Many nutrition-based materials can be obtained from volunteer agencies and governmental offices. Use them!

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the use of computers and technology in the classroom. If you are fortunate enough to have computers in your classroom, integrate the use of these learning tools with nutrition education. Surf the nutrition information highway, search CD-ROMs, and experience nutrition multimedia along with your students. Who knows, even your own nutritional habits may improve! ♥