

Mealtime Memo

for Child Care

Encouraging Healthy Habits Tips for Child Care Providers

Good nutrition and physical activity are important for healthy growth and development. During the early years, young children tend to thrive when they have balanced, nutritious meals and snacks. The nutrients found in these promote cognitive, physical, and social development. In addition to good nutrition, young children who are physically active are less likely to be overweight or suffer from other chronic illnesses. Above all, making good nutrition and physical activity a priority in child care can help young children to have a healthy start in life.



Plan nutritious meals that taste good and children love to eat. Talk about what makes food nutritious. Tell them how food provides vitamins that help their body grow, however, make sure not to use foods that are high in calories and low in nutrients. Keep in mind that if children in your care eat foods that are high in calories, fat, and sugar at home, it may take time for them to start eating the healthy foods you serve. Consider having children to purposely move around more to increase their activity level. You could have “movement time” when you blow the whistle. During that time children would be able to move around or even dance for one minute.

Provide Healthy Eating Experiences

Children should know that regardless of what the day may bring, everyone is allowed to choose from the food you offer. They should feel confident that it will not be taken away as a punishment, nor will it be given as a reward. Remember, never use food to punish or reward behaviors.



The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' *Benchmarks for Nutrition in Child Care* offers additional guidance on encouraging healthy eating habits.

- Provide children with a variety of healthy foods and beverages in appropriate portions.
- Limit less-healthy foods that contribute little to meeting children's nutrition needs.
- Be mindful of food safety, foodborne illness, and food allergies.
- Respect diversity and offer a variety of foods.

Promote Physical Activity

Eating healthy is not the only factor in developing healthy habits. The combination of a healthy diet and physical activity will improve the overall well-being of children. Physical activity is important and should be encouraged daily. Teach them simple movements that can be done inside or outside.

Activities can vary from hula hooping or playing with appropriate size balls to riding a tricycle or running in place. Ask the children what they like to do to be active. Whatever activity you choose, make sure it is safe for everyone. To further encourage physical activity at home, you can give them an activity log and ask their parents to sign off on it. The log should show what activity they chose and how long they did the activity. If they bring the log back to the center, you can give them a reward.



Incorporate Nutrition Education and Activities

Offer daily lessons regarding food and nutrition. Children should know food is needed to be healthy, should be enjoyed, and is necessary for them to grow and develop properly. Here are some great suggestions to incorporate more vegetables into your nutrition education.

- Purchase seasonal, fresh vegetables for children to try.
- Talk about vegetables and their nutrients.
- Provide vegetables for children to decorate.
- Have mild spices available for children to taste test with vegetables.

Be supportive of the children in your care by telling them they are doing a good job and making good choices after they try a new food or activity. It doesn't matter if they do not like it, praise them for giving it a try. After all, some children have to try new things several times before liking it.

References

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