

MealTime Memo

January

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FUELING YOUNG MINDS: How Nutrition Supports Learning



Every day, you do more than care for children—you help them grow strong and healthy. One of the best ways to support this growth is by serving nutritious meals and snacks. This *Mealtime Memo* explores how healthy eating supports brain development, learning, and lifelong habits.

Nutrition and Brain Development

The brain grows very fast during early childhood, especially from birth to age two. Children need foods with protein, healthy fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals—as well as water—to grow and to learn. Without these nutrients, children may learn or grow more slowly. Over time, nutrition can even influence how they act and perform in school.

Learning Starts with Nutrition

Healthy meals fuel memory, learning, and growth.



Nutrients That Support Brain Growth

Specific nutrients—such as iron, zinc, choline, folic acid, omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamin B-12—are especially important for healthy brain development. You do not need to memorize every nutrient.

The easiest way to fuel brain growth is to serve a mix of foods from all food groups—milk, meat, poultry, fish, dairy, beans, nuts, seeds, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Together, these foods provide the nutrients children need to learn, grow, and succeed. Good nutrition helps the brain grow, but hunger can make learning harder.



Hunger Makes It Hard to Learn



When children are hungry, it is hard for them to focus or stay calm. They may act out or struggle with behavior. Meals from the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) help meet children's nutritional needs. For some children, these meals may be the most nutritious, or only, meals they receive all day. Your role in providing balanced, nutritious meals truly supports learning and development.

Build Smarter Meals and Snacks

Small changes can help children get better nutrition. Try these ideas:

- Choose **whole grains** like brown rice, quinoa, whole wheat tortillas, or whole grain cereal.
- Add **leafy greens** like spinach and kale, or **colorful veggies** like broccoli, sweet potatoes, corn, and tomatoes to whole grain pasta or brown rice dishes.
- Sprinkle **flax or chia seeds** in oatmeal, smoothies, or yogurt. Add **berries** as a topping.
- Top salads with **edamame, nuts, seeds***, and other vegetables like carrots, red cabbage, yellow peppers, and cucumbers.
- Bake or roast lean meat, chicken, and fish with **herbs and spices** for flavor, and try to include fish on the menu at least once a week. Check out the Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition's [Spice Blends poster](#) for 12 different spice blend recipes.
- Serve **high-protein, high-fiber** meals and snacks. Here are some ideas:



Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack
Oatmeal topped with slivered almonds* and flax seeds Pear slices 1% milk	Egg salad sandwiches Whole wheat roll Green peas Banana 1% milk	Hummus Whole grain pitas
Scrambled eggs with veggies (spinach, peppers, mushrooms) 1% milk	Baked chicken Quinoa and lentil salad Roasted Brussels sprouts 1% milk	Nut butter Apple slices
Yogurt Parfait: Greek yogurt layered with raspberries and pumpkin seeds* 1% milk	Baked cod Wild rice Blackberries Roasted chickpeas 1% milk	Cottage cheese Cherry tomatoes

*Nuts and seeds are a choking hazard for children under the age of 4 years.

Set the Stage for Lifelong Health

The habits children learn now can last a lifetime. By serving healthy meals and showing good eating habits, you help children stay healthy for life.



References

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