

Food Faces and Salsa Gardens

Fostering Healthy Habits with Young Children

by Lisa Dobberteen

At a young age, children have an enormous capacity to develop habits that will sustain them for life. They learn from what they see the adults around them doing. Keeping active, eating healthy, exercising, and having good health habits are important for children and grownups alike.

Think about your own actions as an example. When you are around the children in your program, are you active? Do you eat healthy foods? Do you model safe and healthy habits? What you do matters! To model the best behaviors for children:

- encourage adults in your program to be present for the children, instead of using phones and tablets.
- avoid having televisions on in the background.
- encourage staff to eat healthy food and drink water, rather than drinking juice and soda. Let the children see them eating vegetables and fruit as well.

You get the picture! When you show children how to incorporate healthy practices into their lives, you will help

them build a lifetime of positive health habits.

You, as the child care provider, can encourage the children in your life and their parents to be active, to eat healthy, and to play imagination games. Through your interactions with children, you have a unique ability to help them stay away from electronic devices and choose reading or playing instead.

Establishing Healthy Eating Habits from Infancy

The key to success: make it fun! Remember, presentation is everything.

- Turn plain, cold green peas into a dot-to-dot with healthy dressing or string cheese.
- Offer a child a plate of crisp, colorful, sliced vegetables that can be dipped in hummus, Greek yogurt, or low-fat ranch dip.
- Put fruit and yogurt in a blender with skim milk and you have a healthy smoothie.
- Decorate snacks and plates with faces made of vegetable bits. Children are always much more inclined to eat



when they put meals and snacks together themselves, and showing them which food choices are healthy will help them make the right choices later on. (See Resources for more healthy food choices.)

When you are caring for infants, you also have great opportunities to create healthy food habits:

- Help parents know that “breast is best” and talk to them about ways to make nursing work.



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- Partner with parents who choose formula to make sure the child is getting the same type of formula when he or she is in your care.
- Talk with parents when they begin to introduce food about pediatricians' recommendations for healthy food choices.
- Collaborate with parents to know what foods to try with babies, how to document babies' reactions, and how to support daily nutrition.

Working together, you can set each child on a healthy eating path.

Most children love fruit. They also love to learn about fruit, vegetables, seeds, and how things grow. A nice, sweet cherry tomato can appeal to the pickiest of eaters. Gardening is a great activity that helps promote both healthy eating and exercise. If you don't have outdoor space at your site or families can't garden at home, use recycled empty

plastic containers as indoor planters. Planting carrots, radishes, greens or other fast growers really keep kids' interest. Children love to eat what they've grown, and are much more likely to sample a new vegetable if they have watched it grow.

Many flowers and herbs are fast growers as well, and children can learn about grouping certain plants together. Planting:

- basil along with tomato plants makes the tomatoes taste better.
- marigolds along with tomato and pepper plants keeps pests away.
- all the ingredients for a salsa garden is colorful, provides a variety of plants to watch, and yields a wealth of fun activities when they are ready to be harvested.

Even toddlers can gain important learning opportunities from gardening.

But think carefully about activities with babies, who put everything in their mouths. They might end up eating soil.

Ultimately, children learn as they play in nature. Depending on your circumstances, you can bring nature into your classroom with potted plants, pinecones, and 'pet' bugs. You also can explore the outdoors in the landscape where you live. Helping children understand the environment they live in helps them make healthy choices after they leave your program. (For more on nature-based learning, view Resources.)

Incorporating Physical Activity into Play and Learning

Physical activity for children and adults is easy to include in your day, especially if you tie it to something that happens automatically. You can schedule active play times throughout your day. Based on the *Active Start: Physical Activity Guidelines for Children Birth to Five Years* from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 2002):

Physical Activity Guidelines for Children Birth to Five Years from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 2002):

- Infants should interact with adults in daily physical activities to promote exploration of their environment.
- Toddlers should accumulate at least 30 minutes daily of structured activity; at least 60 minutes of daily, unstructured physical activity; and not remain sedentary for more than 60 minutes unless sleeping.
- Preschoolers should accumulate at least 60 minutes daily of struc-



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tured activity; at least 60 minutes of daily, unstructured physical activity; and not remain sedentary for more than 60 minutes unless sleeping (pp. 5-11).

Programs such as “Let’s Move Child Care” and “I Am Moving, I Am Learning” offer you easy ways to integrate active play into your day (see Resources).

When working with parents, encourage them to keep a stroller in their cars and park near a playground when picking their kids up from child care. Then, adults and children can walk or stroll over to the park and play for a bit before heading home. Parents taking public transportation can get off a stop or two before home to have a longer walk home. The fresh air will do everyone good and will help kids be more relaxed when they get home. In neighborhoods where safety is a concern, you can work with other community partners to develop a “Safe Walk” campaign. Volunteers can help parents travel to and from school without safety fears by posting themselves on street corners at arrival and dismissal times. A public awareness campaign can help keep the streets safe for children and families.

There are lots of fun ways to include physical activity in your day as a child care provider or as a parent. City parks may be close enough to walk; children also love to ride on the bus. Talk to parents about going to a large mall on the weekends with ample places to run, walk, and use a stroller indoors if the weather is inclement. Local high schools and elementary schools often open their gyms and swimming pools to families and child care groups after school and on weekends.

Talk with parents to make sure they send children to your program dressed for the weather. Make sure your families understand that children will go outside

in almost every type of weather. It is good practice for children to learn to ‘dress for the weather’ at an early age, and to learn that it can be fun to be outside when it’s cold or wet, as long as you are dressed appropriately.

Active games like kickball, Red Rover, and tag can keep kids amused and active on a daily basis. Even little children can begin to learn the rules of simple games with balls. Kicking, running, and throwing balls all help develop coordination, gross motor and fine motor skills. Remember that infants and toddlers will need a separate play space from preschoolers, and always inspect your playground to make sure it is developmentally appropriate and safe.

Along with sports equipment like balls and bats, simple sturdy toys are best. Basic building block sets, doll houses, trucks, climbing structures, puzzles, arts and crafts supplies, and bubbles all allow children to imagine stories, invent games, and engage with each other. Character-based games and objects promote playing only in sync with the television show or movie in which they originated, closing off the opportunity for open-ended play.

Keep in mind that each child’s safety needs will vary at different stages of development. (For tips on keeping your program safe for children at any developmental stage, see Resources.)

Modeling Healthy Habits

Preventing the spread of germs is another way adults can model good health habits for children. Even the littlest toddler can learn to “Cover your cough!” by coughing into her sleeve or elbow. Using tissues to capture sneezes, washing hands after playing outside or using the bathroom, and staying home when sick are all ways to prevent the spread of germs; and children will learn

these if they see the adults around them modeling this healthy behavior.

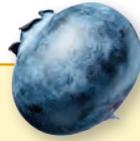
Screens and Books: A Balanced Approach

Finally, a note about screen time. Children today are exposed to far more than television. Adults around them focus on their mobile phones constantly and in some homes televisions are always turned on. Social media is a part of everyday life for many families. And yet it is so important to limit exposure to screen time! Research continues to confirm the impact of screen time on the developing brain. It’s clear that screen time in all forms takes time away from physical exercise and imaginative play. The more on-screen advertisements and marketing children are exposed to, the more junk food and commercial toys they want. Less is more, especially when it comes to all forms of screen time.

Instead, having books and a language-rich environment in your program helps foster a love of reading. Children enjoy listening to stories, picking out letters, looking at pictures, drawing, and engaging in art projects with a wide range of materials. Each activity helps them move into early literacy activities with ease. Big colorful labels on cubbies, storage containers, and learning centers in the classroom add to the focus on words. The most important activity you can do in your program to foster successful readers is to read aloud to children, and often! Communicating this message to parents helps ensure it happens at home, too.

In Conclusion

Back to basics is best when thinking about creating and sustaining healthy habits in young children. Active play, simple classic toys that promote imaginative play, time for reading, plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables,



Healthy Habits

When working with children and families in your program, you may wonder “What do the experts recommend?” *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs*, “represents the best evidence, expertise, and experience in the country on quality health and safety practices and policies... in early care and education settings” (American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education, 2011, xvii). The following is a list of standards you can use to support addressing healthy habits in your program.

2.1.1.2. Health, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Safety Awareness

Quality programs integrate health, nutrition, physical activity, and safety into all elements of daily practice.

2.4. Health Education

An integral part of program work is to offer health education to children, staff, and parents or guardians to promote healthy behaviors.

3.1.3. Physical Activity and Limiting Screen Time

Children should have ample opportunities to play outside and participate in both structured and unstructured physical activities.

3.2.2. Hand Hygiene

Staff use and teach proper hand hygiene so that children and families know when and how to wash hands to prevent the spread of illness.

3.3.0.1. Routine Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting

In high-quality programs, staff prevents the spread of illness by following specific procedures for cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting.

4.2. General Requirements (Nutrition)

Children attending child care or family child care programs have access to healthy food choices chosen with care by administrators and staff.

4.3. Requirements for Special Groups or Ages of Children

Age-specific information provides even more information about developing healthy nutrition habits.

4.5. Meal Service, Seating, and Supervision

Healthy nutrition habits should be modeled throughout meal and snack times, and staff should encourage healthy and safe eating behaviors as well.

4.7. Nutrition Learning Experiences for Children and Nutrition Education for Parents/Guardians

As programs develop nutrition plans, they create learning opportunities to empower children and families to make healthy choices.

9.2.1.1. Content of Policies

Program management ensures that staff and parents have access to policies that cover implementation of healthy habits within everyday routines and activities.



drinking water, and taking care to avoid spreading germs are all great habits to model for the young children in your life. You, as the child care provider, can partner with parents to become each child's best teacher and role model.

Let's Move Child Care:
<https://healthykidshealthyfuture.org>

Tips for Keeping Children Safe:
 A Developmental Guide:
<http://1.usa.gov/1pYgSGW>



References

American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. (2011). *Caring for our children: National health and safety performance standards, Guidelines for early care and education programs* (3rd edition). Elk Grove Village, IL and Washington, DC: Authors. Also available at <http://cfoc.nrckids.org/>

National Association for Sport Physical Education. (NASPE). (2002). *Active Start: A statement of physical activity guidelines for children birth to five years* (pp. 5-11). Reston, VA: NASPE. Available at: www.shapeamerica.org/standards/guidelines/activestart.cfm

Resources

Growing Healthy:
 Feeding Your 9 Month Old:
<http://1.usa.gov/1MklY6X>

Growing Healthy:
 Feeding Your Toddler:
<http://1.usa.gov/1YROT2Y>

Growing Healthy:
 Feeding Your Preschooler:
<http://1.usa.gov/21WfJiI>

I Am Moving, I Am Learning:
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/healthy-active-living/imil/interactive/index.html>

Nature-Based Learning and Development
<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/eecd/nature-based-learning>

