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Nutritional Needs of School-Age Children

Is Your Child Eating a Healthy Diet?

Proper nutrition is one of the most important influences on your youngster's well-being. A varied, balanced diet-containing vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates, and even some fat-promotes growth, energy and overall health.

Food preferences are developed early in life, mostly during early and middle childhood. Once they are established, they are hard to break. Thus, the earlier you encourage healthful food choices for your child, the better

From early on, your child will watch you for clues to proper food choices. She will copy many of your habits, likes and dislikes. During the middle years, the model you provide at home will be extremely important in both guiding and reinforcing good eating habits. However, as children spend many hours a day away from home, in school and with friends, a variety of social and other factors influence what and when children eat. As they hurry to catch the school bus in the morning, they may speed through breakfast, leaving a half-full plate as they rush out the door. For lunch at school - despite the school's effort to offer healthy choices - youngsters might choose high-fat or sugar-laden foods that do not contribute to a balanced diet. They also might become much more susceptible to pressures from friends to choose soft drinks rather than milk, or a candy bar instead of fresh fruit.

Even at this young age, children in competitive sports may be misled by a Little League coach or other authority figure to adopt certain questionable eating habits, on the premise that these might improve performance. A major influence on children is television advertising, which often promotes unhealthy food selections.

Monitoring Food Needs

In general, it is the parents' job to monitor what their child eats, while the child is in the best position to decide how much to eat. Normally, healthy and active children's bodies do a good job of "asking" for just the right amount of food, although their minds may lead them astray when choosing which foods to eat.

You can easily overestimate the amount of food your child actually needs, especially during the younger years of middle childhood. Youngsters of this age do not need adult-sized servings of food. However, if you are unaware of this, you might place almost as much food on your child's plate as on your own. As a result, your child must choose between being criticized for leaving food on his plate, or for overeating and running the risk of obesity.

Weighing your children occasionally is one way for you to monitor your youngsters' nutrition. There is rarely a reason for you to count calories for your children, since most youngsters control their intake quite well. As the middle years progress, children's total energy needs will increase and thus their food intake will rise, especially as they approach puberty.

Between ages 7 and 10, both boys and girls consume about 1,600 to 2,400 calories per day, although caloric needs obviously vary considerably even under normal circumstances. Most girls experience a significant increase in their growth rate between ages 10 and 12 and will take in about 200 calories more each day, while boys go through their growth spurt about two years later and increase their food intake by nearly 500 calories a day. During this time of rapid growth, they will probably require more total calories and nutrients than at any other period in their lives - from calcium to encourage bone growth, to protein to build body tissue.

At most ages boys require more calories than girls, primarily because of their larger body size. But appetites can vary, even from day to day, depending on factors like activity levels. A child who spends the afternoon doing homework, for example, may have fewer caloric needs than one who plays outdoors after school. **Every child's caloric needs are different.**

Picky Eaters

Some parents worry that their child is not eating as much as she should. However, even with what seems to be relatively low food intake, children can grow at normal rates. Some children simply do not eat as much as their peers. Their appetite may not be as large, and/or they may be finicky eaters, unwilling even to taste certain types of foods.

At one time these characteristics appeared to be a normal part of middle childhood. You do not usually have to worry that this frustrating behavior is impairing her growth. Appetites may fluctuate as youngsters grow. Even within the same family, brothers and sisters may vary considerably in the amounts and types of food they desire. Generally, children increase their food consumption considerably as they enter the growth spurts associated with puberty; until then, however, a child's appetite may be unpredictable.

Some children are less open to trying new foods than others. You might have more success introducing new foods as part of familiar foods that your child already enjoys. For instance, a child who dislikes hot cereal may be more receptive if you add bananas or raisins to it. While she may not enjoy cooked carrots, she still might eat them when they are part of a stew, meat loaf or soup.

Do not fall into the trap of feeling she will starve and thus give in to her desire for junk food. Avoid special rewards or strong, coercive encouragement for trying something new ("You're going to bed early tonight unless you try the chicken!"). If you introduce foods in a confrontational way, you and your child may become caught up in a battle, and he may stubbornly resist these foods even more. Offering rewards for particular foods may give your youngster the impression that the food would otherwise be undesirable.

As frustrating as your child's picky eating habits may be, keep in mind that you, too, may have foods you like and dislike. In general, youngsters outgrow these food preferences without any harm to their physical well-being.

In most cases, go along with your child's wishes, as long as she likes enough foods to achieve a balanced diet. In our relatively affluent society severe malnutrition is uncommon. Nevertheless, when a child's caloric intake is severely restricted - as in an eating disorder, or during a chronic illness - then her development and her overall health can be seriously harmed. Certainly if your child is losing weight, discuss this situation with your doctor.

Adapted from AAP Handouts