



by Karen Stephens

Nutrition: Build Good Eating Habits to Side-Step Picky Eaters

Making sure kids are fed is one of parents' strongest instincts — as it should be. Children must be well-nourished to support their very rapid brain development. Only when children get required nutrients can they reach their potential in physical growth and motor coordination. Children also need nourishment to sustain energy for expanding social development and all the activities it involves.

While parents have primary responsibility for children's nutrition, we also have another very important goal to meet. We must help children gradually become responsible for their own nutrition and eating habits so they eat wisely as adults. The habit of making wise food choices is most easily learned in childhood. When good nutrition is consistently practiced throughout childhood, kids are much more likely to adopt the habits for life.

Following are *dos and don'ts* to lead your child along the path of wise nutrition. These tips will also reduce your chances of raising a picky eater.

- Build positive attitudes toward all foods by being a good role model. If you eat a wide variety of foods, your child is likely to follow your lead. Eat what you want kids to eat. Don't eat what you don't want them to eat — at least not in their presence.
- Set a predictable, scheduled time for snacks and meals. Children and their stomachs thrive on routine. Overly hungry kids are more likely to be whiney and uncooperative, so regular meals have multiple benefits.
- Keep food in perspective. Teach children food is merely fuel for the body. It provides nutrients we need to grow. It's a birthright; not a special privilege, a weapon, or a substitute for love.
- Make mealtime a warm, welcoming family ritual. Turn off the television and play a relaxing instrumental CD instead. Make togetherness and conversation the focus, not rating the food or dissecting it. Children can help set out (or even make) place mats or a small centerpiece. And, like adults, kids enjoy a special meal by candlelight.
- Encourage vigorous daily play to build good appetites. Limit television and computer time!
- Keep snack portions modest and avoid high fat and high sugar snacks.
- For regular meals a low fat protein, whole grain item, fruit and vegetables with a glass of milk is a great meal for kids; a sugary dessert would merely add low nutrient calories.
- Teach children to eat until they feel full, not stuffed. Trust young children's appetites. Research shows that until age 3 children do a very good job of eating just until they feel full. As a result, they rarely overeat.
- However, from age 4, most of us continue to eat for reasons other than continued hunger. And so we consume more calories than our body needs to fuel normal daily activity. As a result, about 60% of our adult population is overweight, and for the first time in our history, childhood obesity in the school years is a major national health problem.
- Gradually introduce a variety of foods to your menus. Variety increases nutrients.
- Introduce one new food at a time, not several. Introduce a new food with preferred and favorite foods.
- Don't argue about food tastes; they are intensely personal. Mealtimes aren't for debates. State your preferences, "I like the bumpy feel of the tapioca," then move on to other talk.

“The habit of making wise food choices is most easily learned in childhood.”

- Tantalize taste buds by offering foods of different textures, smells, and colors. Be patient when they aren't at first to your child's liking. Say, "Maybe someday you'll find it more enjoyable," and leave it at that.
- Be creative. Offer foods of another culture to liven up mealtime.
- Be alert to possible food allergies. There is no sense forcing food into children if it makes them break out in a rash (or worse!) There are healthy alternatives, even for cow's milk.
- Don't become a short order cook; cook one meal for the family. Hungry children will eat.
- Children like to discover new foods on their own, at their own pace. Place meal items on their plate, but resist announcing, "I have a new food for you!" That sets kids on edge right away. Let them approach foods in their own easy-does-it style.
- Serve foods prepared by various methods — raw, steamed, broiled, baked, roasted, or toasted — so children can discover a way to enjoy them.
- Bite-sized finger foods appeal to children most. Serve at least one at each meal.
- Make vegetables more appealing by serving with small amounts of a low fat sauce.
- Don't serve huge portions. One tablespoon of each food is a good beginning; build gradually from there.
- Avoid strong spices and food served too hot; children's taste buds are very sensitive.
- Don't jump to conclusions when your child doesn't at first like a food. It can take several exposures to a new food before kids decide if they like it or not.
- Involve children in snack and meal preparation. Participation builds pride and motivates them to try new foods.
- By age 3 most children can participate in family-style service, meaning they can pass small bowls and spoon food onto their plates. This encourages independence and allows a sense of control. Simply state each person must have a small amount of each food on their plate. (And yes, some strong-willed kids will cut a pea in half to meet that requirement. If so, accept it and resist the invitation to a power struggle.)
- Don't panic if your child misses a meal by refusing to eat. I've never met a child who wouldn't eat if hungry. Sidestep power-struggles with children who try to manipulate your emotions with their eating habits. If you play into power struggles, children learn how to push your aggravation buttons. Remember, you've done your part by offering good food in a nice setting. (And silently chant the truism that, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.")
- Be matter of fact at meal times. Don't beg or badger children into trying food. State that you expect them to take one taste of everything and leave it at that. Don't force children into cleaning their plates. Taking even a very small taste is compliance enough.
- Avoid tug-of-war bribery such as, "You won't get dessert if you don't clean up your asparagus." Sugary desserts should only be for infrequent special occasions.
- Don't over-react and become personally offended if your child makes faces and cries, "Gross!" when seeing a particular food. Unemotionally tell them to give their opinion in a more polite way. Remain calm and continue your meal. Respond to children's "I hate this!" by saying, "You don't have to like green beans, just take a taste. They have fuel your body needs to grow."
- Teach proper behavior if your child finds a food so distasteful that he spits it out. Nonchalantly say, "I see you're surprised by its taste (or texture). If you have to spit out food, please spit into your napkin."
- Don't panic or over-react if your child seems to focus on one type of food. Research has shown that children may occasionally go on a binge with one type of food. Over a week or two they go back to getting their nutrients from a wider food array.
- Don't set the stage for eating problems by using food or trips to a fast food restaurant as a reward or punishment for a particular behavior. Food is fuel, not a bargaining chip.
- Plant a vegetable garden and/or fruit trees together. Children will try foods they plant and harvest.
- Address preschooler's picky eater issues by reading a children's book together. *Bread and Jam for Frances* by Russel Hoban (New York: HarperCollins Trophy, 1993) and *Gregory the Terrible Eater* by Mitchell Sharmat (New York: Scholastic, 1989) are both good choices.
- Books about nutrition that early elementary children can explore include: *Good Enough to Eat: A Kids' Guide to Food & Nutrition* by Anne Rockwell (New York: HarperCollins Juvenile Books, 1999) and the seven books in the collection titled, *Pyramid Pal: Adventures in Eating* by Susan Dawson and Susan Norton (Pembroke, MA: Griffin Books, 2000).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

© Karen Stephens 2007