

Nutrition for Toddlers and Preschoolers

By Janelle Durham, MSW. Parent Educator for Bellevue College. <http://bellevuetoddlers.wordpress.com>

Your job is to decide what food to offer, when to offer, and where the child may eat. Your child's job is to decide what to eat and how much.

What to Offer: Offer a variety of healthy choices – 2 to 3 items at each meal. Children often prefer foods they can feed to themselves. Many children prefer food as separate items – if the family is eating spaghetti, your child may want plain noodles, sauce on the side, and a meatball on the side. Offer food in unbreakable dishes with utensils the child can hold. Give milk or juice with meals, and offer water between meals.

To encourage your child to try new foods: Offer a new food with familiar, well-loved foods. Try the food yourself, describing its texture, taste, and smell. Give a small portion to begin with (3 peas, 2 beans) so there's less waste. Children may need to be offered a new food 10 – 15 times before they'll try it, and the first few "tries" may be a lick, or a small taste, or holding it in their mouth then spitting it out. Over time, they will eat more of it. Involving your child in choosing and preparing a new food may get them more excited about eating it.

Be a good role model: eat healthy, try a variety of foods yourself, talk about healthy eating. Exercise, and have fun being active together.

When to Offer: Most young children eat three meals a day, plus two or three snacks. This helps them keep a stable blood sugar level (and thus a stable mood and energy level) throughout the day. Try not to let your child graze all day long. It is better to eat full meals and let the body rest/digest between meals. If your child whines about this, remind yourself that they won't starve if they have to wait!

Also, don't use food as a distraction every time you're in the car, at the library, and so on. Try to develop other ideas for keeping them busy.

Where Child May Eat: Most experts recommend feeding your child only at the dining table or in the kitchen, rather than eating all around the house. They also recommend sitting and talking with your child, both for safety's sake and as a great opportunity for building communication skills, and strengthening your relationship. Turn off TV's and other screens and focus on time together.

What Your Child Chooses To Eat: Your child may be eating less than she did just a few months ago. It is normal for a toddler's appetite to decrease, as their rate of growth slows after age one. You will notice that some days your child barely touches his food, and other days he seems to eat non-stop. This is fine. Look at how much food and how much variety they take in over the course of a week, not just one day.

Don't force your child to eat. Toddlers are trying to assert their independence, and it is easy for food to become a power struggle.

Supplements: consult with your child's doctor. If a child has a well-rounded diet, none may be needed. In Seattle's non-sunny climate, a common recommendation is 400 IU / day of vitamin D. Omega 3 fatty acids are recommended by many naturopaths. If your family is vegetarian, or vegan, pay special attention to vitamins B12, D, riboflavin, calcium, and protein.

Reducing Risk of Choking: Children should always sit when eating. There should be an adult nearby. Avoid foods that are hard to chew (steak, jerky, stringy celery), small and round (hard candy, popcorn; grapes – cut these in half; carrot slices, hot dogs, chunks of cheese– cut these into thin sticks); spoonfuls of peanut butter (OK to spread thin on things). Learn choking rescue: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOWwyJEFiPo

Recommended Daily Servings – Food Groups

Food Group	Servings per day	Toddler serving	Adult serving	Tips
Grains	6	Bread 1/2 slice Cereal 1/2 cup Rice, pasta, oatmeal 1/4 cup Crackers, check label: feed 1/2 serving	Bread 1 slice Cereal 1 cup Rice, pasta, oats 1/2 cup Crackers – check label	Choose whole-grain foods as much as possible – check labels, and choose foods that include the word “whole-grain”.
Vegetables	2 – 3	Cooked veggies 1-2 tbsp per year old Veggie juice - 1/2 cup	1 cup raw or cooked 2 cups raw leafy veggie 1 cup veggie juice	Include a variety: dark leafy greens, orange vegetables, beans, starchy vegetables (corn, potatoes, peas)
Fruit	2	Cooked or canned fruit 1/2 cup Dried fruit – 1/4 cup Fresh fruit – 1/2 apple, 1/2 banana, 4 strawberries, 6 grapes, etc.	Cooked / canned 1 cup Dried 1/2 cup Fresh- 1 piece	Enjoy a variety of fruits. Fresh is better than canned or dried. It is much better to eat whole fruits than juice.
Dairy	2 – 3	Milk 1/2 cup (4 ounces) Cheese 3/4 ounce (1 inch cube) String cheese – 1 stick Yogurt 4 ounces	Milk 1 cup Cheese 1 1/2 ounce, processed cheese 2 oz Yogurt 1 cup	Choose whole milk products for child, fat-free for adult. If you do not tolerate dairy, try cultured forms like cheese, yogurt, acidophilus milk. Or get calcium from other sources.
Protein Foods:	2 ounces toddler, 6 for adult	1 ounce equals Meat, fish, tofu: 2 1-inch cubes or a piece the size of child’s palm Egg – 1; Dried beans, peas, or lentils, cooked – 1/4 cup (4 tbsp) Nuts 1/2 ounce; Nut butter 1 tbsp, spread thin on bread or apple		Choose lean meats, trim or drain excess fats. Choose seafood at least twice a week. (Choose seafood low in mercury – generally the smaller the fish, the less mercury)

Fluids	1/2 ounce a day per pound they weigh	Water is the drink of choice. Give your child a water bottle they can have with them as they play. Limit juice to no more than 4- 6 ounces a day. Choose 100% juice and dilute half and half with water. Milk: limit to 16 - 24 ounces a day – you don’t want your child to fill up on milk and lack variety in diet. Toddler can drink from a regular cup. They don’t need a bottle, and preferably not a sippy cup.		
Total Calories	Child: AAP says between 1 and 3 years old, a child needs 40 calories for every inch of height. USDA: children ages 2 and 3 need about 1,000 to 1,400 calories each day to maintain a healthy body weight Adult: 2200 calories (for a woman who is 5’4”, 150 pounds, does 30 minutes moderate activity per day)			
Protein	1- to 3-year-old children need 0.55 grams of protein per pound of body weight per day. (FYI: milk has 1 gram per ounce)			
Fat	Fats are important for long-lasting energy, feeling satisfied after a meal, and brain growth! They help us absorb other nutrients. In first 2 years, half of calories should come from fat. After that, 1/3. Healthy fats are found in: flax seeds, fish, nuts, avocados, corn oil, soybean oil, olive oil, canola oil. Minimize fats that are solid at room temperature: butter, shortening, meat fats			
Iron	15 mg / day. Good sources: lean meat, iron enriched breads and cereals, cooked dried beans, greens. Combine iron rich foods with foods rich in vitamin C to aid absorption. If not getting in diet, may need supplement. (Keep iron supplements in child-proof containers out of reach of children.)			

Best resources

Overview: www.brightfutures.org/nutritionfamfact/pdf/ColorEng/EC12color.pdf

Basics: www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/default.aspx

Handouts on special topics: www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nibbles-health-nutrition-newsletters-parents-young-children

Sample daily menus and ideas for toddler-friendly foods: <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/Sample-Daily-Menu-for-a-2-Year-Old.aspx>; www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers.html; www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/picky-eaters/make-food-fun.html