

BALLESTRINI'S EARLY LEARNING CENTER

Family Connection

A Guide to Proper Nutrition for Preschool Aged Children



Healthy habits start at home—let's build them together!

Helping children develop healthy eating habits is about more than just the food on their plate—it's about creating a positive environment where food is enjoyed, explored, and shared. Proper nutrition plays a vital role in children's growth, development, and overall well-being. At Ballestrini's Early Learning Centers, we believe that fostering healthy eating habits from a young age sets the foundation for a lifetime of wellness. We encourage families to embrace these simple yet powerful strategies to promote healthy eating at home.

Healthy Eating Myths Vs. Facts

Myth #1: Picky Eating Is Just a Phase That Goes Away on Its Own

✓ Fact: While many children go through a picky eating phase, it's important to continue offering a variety of foods and encouraging exploration. Avoid pressuring them, but keep exposing them to new flavors in a positive way.

Myth #2: Kids Need to Finish Everything on Their Plate

✓ Fact: Forcing children to eat everything can lead to unhealthy eating habits and override their natural hunger cues. Encourage them to listen to their body and stop eating when they feel full.

Myth #3: Healthy Food Is Too Expensive

✓ Fact: Nutritious meals don't have to be costly! Buying in bulk, choosing frozen or canned (low-sodium) vegetables, and cooking simple meals at home can save money while providing balanced nutrition.

Myth #4: If Kids Refuse a Food Once, They Don't Like It

✓ Fact: It can take 10-15 exposures before a child accepts a new food. Keep offering it in different ways, like roasted instead of raw or mixed into a favorite dish.

Myth #5: Juice Is a Healthy Alternative to Soda

✓ Fact: While 100% fruit juice contains vitamins, it lacks fiber and has a high sugar content. Whole fruits are a better choice, and juice should be limited to 4-6 ounces per day.



COMMON MISTAKES

Even with the best intentions, some feeding habits can create challenges for children as they develop their relationship with food.

Avoiding these common mistakes can help

foster a positive and stress-free mealtime experience. Instead of focusing on control or pressure, encourage a balanced approach that allows children to explore new foods, listen to their hunger cues, and develop lifelong healthy eating habits. Here are some things to avoid when feeding young children:

✗ **Don't force children to eat.** Pressuring them can create a negative relationship with food. Offer meals and let them decide how much to eat.

✗ **Don't use food as a reward or punishment.** Encouraging treats for good behavior can lead to unhealthy emotional eating habits.

✗ **Don't let toddlers and preschoolers graze all day.** Stick to structured meal and snack times to promote good eating habits.

✗ **Don't give too many sugary drinks.** Water and milk should be the main beverages—limit juice to 100% fruit juice and no more than 4 oz per day. Avoid soda and sugary drinks altogether.

✗ **Don't rely on processed snacks.** Many packaged snacks are high in sugar and sodium. Offer whole foods like fruit, veggies, yogurt, and whole-grain crackers instead.

✗ **Don't serve choking hazards.** Avoid whole grapes, popcorn, nuts, large chunks of meat, raw carrots, and hot dogs unless they are cut into safe, small pieces.

✗ **Don't expect picky eaters to love new foods immediately.** It may take multiple exposures before they accept a new food—keep offering it without pressure.

✗ **Don't make separate meals for picky eaters.** Encourage them to eat what the family eats by offering a variety of healthy options at each meal.

Tips for Encouraging Healthy Eating at Home

Helping children develop a positive relationship with food starts at home. By making mealtime a fun and interactive experience, you can encourage healthy habits that will last a lifetime. Here are some ways to promote healthy eating in a stress-free way:

- ✓ **Be a Role Model** – Children are more likely to try new foods if they see their caregivers enjoying them.
 - ✓ **Offer a Variety of Foods** – Introduce different flavors, textures, and colors early to expand their palate.
 - ✓ **Avoid Bribing with Dessert** – Instead of saying, "Eat your veggies, and you can have dessert," try, "We eat different foods to help our bodies grow strong."
 - ✓ **Make Healthy Food Accessible** – Keep cut-up fruits and veggies in easy reach for snacks, and serve water instead of sugary drinks.
 - ✓ **Encourage Self-Serving** – Allow children to serve themselves at mealtime (with guidance) so they can listen to their hunger cues and develop independence.
 - ✓ **Stick to a Routine** – Serve meals and snacks at consistent times to prevent constant grazing and ensure balanced eating throughout the day.
 - ✓ **Eat Together as a Family** – Family mealtimes help children develop social skills, improve communication, and create positive associations with food.
 - ✓ **Make Food Fun** – Arrange food into fun shapes, create colorful meals, and offer dipping sauces to make vegetables more appealing.
 - ✓ **Be Patient with Picky Eaters** – It can take several exposures before a child accepts a new food. Keep offering it in different ways without pressure.
- By making food an enjoyable and stress-free experience, children will be more likely to develop healthy eating habits that will stick with them as they grow!
- ✓ **Limit Sugary Drinks:** Water and milk are the best beverage choices for young children.

The Importance of Drinking Water



- Staying hydrated is just as important as eating well. Young children can become dehydrated quickly, especially when active. Encouraging them to drink water throughout the day helps with digestion, concentration, and overall health.
- ✓ Preschoolers need about 5 cups per day
 - ✓ Offer a fun water bottle to make drinking more exciting, add fruit slices for natural flavor.
 - ✓ be a role model—drink water with your child!
 - ✓ Limit sugary drinks : Milk and water are the best choices.

Healthy Snacking

Snacks are an essential part of a young child's diet, providing energy and nutrients between meals. However, not all snacks are created equal! Choosing whole, nutrient-dense foods instead of processed, sugary options can help children maintain steady energy levels, improve concentration, and develop healthy eating habits.

- ✓ **Protein** - Helps with growth and keeps kids full longer (yogurt, cheese, nuts, eggs).
- ✓ **Fiber** – Aids digestion and stabilizes blood sugar (whole grains, fruits, vegetables).
- ✓ **Healthy Fats** – Supports brain development and keeps kids satisfied (avocado, nut butter, full-fat dairy).

Good choices:

- Cheese with whole-wheat crackers
- Greek yogurt with fruit
- Nut butter on whole-grain toast
- Hummus with veggies
- Unsalted nuts and seeds (for older preschoolers)



BY INVOLVING CHILDREN IN COOKING, MAKING MEALTIMES ENJOYABLE, AND BEING PATIENT WITH PICKY EATING, YOU CAN HELP YOUR CHILD DEVELOP A LIFELONG APPRECIATION FOR NUTRITIOUS FOODS. FROM FAMILY MEALS TO SNACK CHOICES AND FUN FOOD-RELATED ACTIVITIES, THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO MAKE NUTRITION A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR CHILDREN.

Nutrition Focus:

By preschool age, children can enjoy most of the same foods as adults, but they still require balanced meals and structured snack times to support their rapid growth and development. This stage is an important time to reinforce healthy eating habits that will carry into later childhood and beyond. Offering a variety of nutrient-rich foods ensures they receive the essential vitamins and minerals needed for strong bones, brain development, and overall well-being.

Here's a simple guide to meeting your preschooler's daily nutritional needs:

✓ Milk & Dairy (Calcium & Vitamin D)

- ◆ **Daily goal:** 2–2.5 cups of dairy or fortified alternatives
- ◆ **Why it matters:** Supports strong bones and teeth
- ◆ **Good choices:** Low-fat yogurt, cheese, milk, cottage cheese, or fortified plant-based alternatives (almond, soy, or oat milk with calcium and vitamin D)

✓ Protein

- ◆ **Daily goal:** 3–4 ounces of protein
- ◆ **Why it matters:** Builds muscles, supports immune function
- ◆ **Good choices:** Grilled chicken, turkey, tofu, beans, eggs, fish, lean beef, or nut butters (for children without allergies)

✓ Fruits & Vegetables

- ◆ **Daily goal:** 1.5–2 cups of each
- ◆ **Why it matters:** Provides fiber, vitamins, and antioxidants for digestion and immunity
- ◆ **Good choices:** Sliced strawberries, baby carrots, cucumbers, bell peppers, bananas, blueberries, steamed broccoli, roasted sweet potatoes

✓ Whole Grains

- ◆ **Daily goal:** 4–6 ounces
- ◆ **Why it matters:** Provides long-lasting energy and fiber for digestive health
- ◆ **Good choices:** Whole-wheat pita, quinoa, oatmeal, brown rice, whole-grain pasta, whole-wheat toast



Encouraging Positive Mealtime Habits

Create a Positive Mealtime Environment – Sit together for meals without distractions like screens or toys. This helps children focus on their food and family connections.

Encourage Conversation – Make mealtime interactive by asking open-ended questions about their day. Engaging conversations help build language skills and make meals more enjoyable.

Get Kids Involved in Cooking – Let children help wash fruits and veggies, stir ingredients, or assemble simple dishes. When kids take part in meal prep, they're more likely to try new foods!

Be Patient with Picky Eating – It can take multiple tries before a child accepts a new food. Keep offering it in a relaxed way without pressure.

Here are some simple, engaging ways to get kids excited about food:

- ✓ **Build-Your-Own Meals** – Let kids assemble their own sandwiches, yogurt parfaits, or personal pizzas with healthy toppings.
- ✓ **Food Art** – Create fun designs with fruits, veggies, and whole grains (e.g., fruit faces on toast or rainbow veggie skewers).
- ✓ **Taste Tests** – Introduce new foods and have kids describe the flavors and textures.
- ✓ **Cooking Play** – Let children stir, sprinkle, or mash ingredients while preparing meals.
- ✓ **Grocery Store Treasure Hunt** – Have kids pick out a new fruit or veggie to try each week. Making food fun helps children become more adventurous eaters while building healthy habits!

FOODS TO AVOID OR LIMIT

- ✗ Sugary cereals and candy
- ✗ Deep-fried or overly greasy foods
- ✗ Artificially sweetened beverages

- ✗ Processed meats like bacon and sausage (limit intake)
- ✗ Large servings of refined carbs (white bread, pastries)

