Feeding Children

Many young children tend to be very picky about what they eat. This can be frustrating for parents. If you worry about your child eating too much or too little, refer to the recommended amounts of what children should eat to get the nutrients they need for healthy growth.

For children two to six years old, the recommended serving sizes are about one tablespoon of food per year of age for each food you are serving. For example, a two-year-old would have two tablespoons of rice, two tablespoons of chicken and two tablespoons of peas on his or her plate. Of course, your child may eat more or less, depending on his or her activity level, metabolism and mood at any given meal. (Yes, mood and emotional states make a difference.)

Children have smaller stomachs and may need to eat more often than three times a day. Try thinking of snacks as a mini-meal or another way to get good nutrients into your children, and don’t depend on junk food that may have more calories and fewer of the nutrients they need.

A real challenge when feeding children is to get them to try new foods. Let them help in the preparation of a meal, even in a small way, to encourage them to try something new. Sit down and eat with your children so they have a good example to follow. Some kids seem to exist on nothing, then all of a sudden they are eating everything in sight. This is pretty normal. The important thing is to provide a wide variety of foods so they can get all the vitamins, minerals, protein, fats and carbohydrates they need to grow and be healthy.

Never force children to eat. This can cause them to be overweight or to have food issues. Let them have a choice, but only two or three choices that work for you, not an open menu that turns you into a short order cook.
Many children do better with a routine. Having meals and snacks at a set time actually helps them form better eating habits. This may be a challenge during the summer months, but it is a challenge worth pursuing if you have a picky eater. The atmosphere at mealtime is also important. Try to make mealtime a pleasant experience. If adults are upset or unpleasant, it is difficult for a child to eat, let alone digest the food properly.

Underweight children especially should be encouraged to eat more frequently; take special care to provide routine and a pleasant atmosphere. Overweight children should be encouraged to be more active and should be provided with low-fat and nutrient-dense food. It is not a good idea to put children on diets; it is better to have healthy food around instead of the foods that could contribute to their problem, like candy, pop and chips. Turn off the TV and figure out some fun, active things to do with your kids!

Here are some tips to encourage picky eaters. Serve small servings of bite-sized pieces since large servings may be overwhelming. Try to have meals after a quiet time, such as story time, etc. If picky eaters fill up on sweets, they often choose not to eat much else. Again, try not to have junk food around. Try to serve interesting food, i.e., food with interesting shapes, colors or funny names.

Vitamins should not be substituted for good food. They can help, if your doctor recommends them, but good, healthy food should be the first choice.

High-caffeine foods and high-sugar foods are not recommended for children. Caffeine stimulates and can keep children awake when they need to rest. Sugar causes tooth decay and often takes the place of more nutritious foods. Many sodas have both. Soda should be available only occasionally. It has no nutritional qualities and many extra calories in the form of sugars that are not needed by most children.

Remember too that children often balance their diets over several days rather than one day. So look at the big picture, try to create a pleasant atmosphere and enjoy the good food you serve with your children.

Marsha Munsell is a health, home and family development program assistant for the Cooperative Extension Service, a part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Contact her at 907-474-2429 or mkmunsell@alaska.edu.