

At home, kids will gravitate toward more activity if they are regularly “unplugged” from television and video games. Parents also reap benefits from family walks, bike rides, and other shared activities.

- Make family meals a priority. Breaking bread together promotes good nutrition habits. School-aged children who eat alone in front of the television tend to overeat, while younger children tend to eat fewer nutritious foods when isolated at meals.

Mealtime means more than refueling kids with nutrients—they also get a hefty dose of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual nourishment. As families pass the peas and pour the milk, they also convey values and establish traditions.

Pay attention to the school mealtime atmosphere, too. Bright cafeterias, short lines, and adequate time for children to eat should be goals of every school. Kids should be allowed to relax and socialize—those skills contribute to learning, too! Schools with limited facilities may want to explore “family-style” eating in the classroom.

What Kids Need to Know

Clearly, children are in desperate need of a balanced, sensible message about eating and nutrition. One goal of nutrition education is to enlighten and empower kids so that they will grow to be adults who make informed food choices, avoiding the lure of the latest “food fright.”

What then, should we be teaching kids? The following points outline the basic goals of nutrition education for kids. Chapters 4-12 provide specific, hands-on activities for reaching these goals.

- Emphasize food as it relates to life today. You will lose kids’ attention faster than they can say “osteoporosis” if too much emphasis is placed on how proper nutrition prevents disease. If you succeed in reaching them with the good nutrition message today, their tomorrows will likely be healthier too.

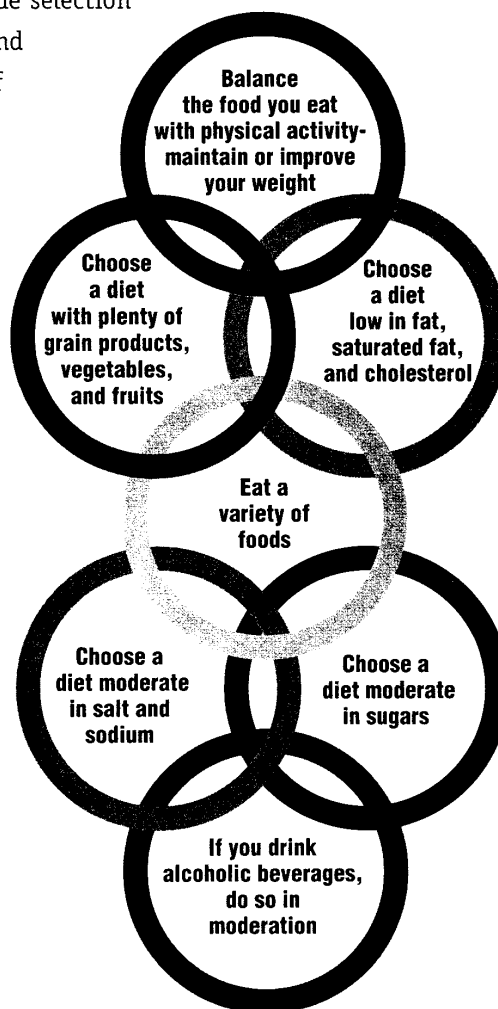
Remind children that healthful food promotes achievement. In school or on the playing field, kids who eat well perform better and achieve higher levels of mastery. A nutritious diet fuels the body for learning, growth, sports, and play.

Well-nourished kids look better, too! Children who eat a balanced diet have bright, sparkly eyes, healthy skin, hair, and teeth, and bodies that look and feel great.

- The message of good nutrition is summed up in the first six *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Adults and kids over the age of two are advised to eat from a wide selection of foods, emphasize grains, fruits and vegetables, moderate the amount of fat, sugar, and sodium they eat, and keep their weight in check. Simple advice that's often hard to put into practice!

Dietary Guidelines for Americans

U.S. Department of Agriculture/
U.S. Department of
Health & Human Services,
fourth edition, 1995.



Two important practical tools for meeting these guidelines are the *Food Guide Pyramid* and the *Nutrition Facts* food label. A “picture” of what a healthful diet looks like, the pyramid is especially useful as a teaching aid for children. The revised food label is a simplified, yet effective, device for analyzing foods and comparing their nutrient content. Ideas for developing a nutrition unit around the *Food Guide Pyramid* and nutrition labels are included, respectively, in chapters four and six.

- Teach children to refuel their bodies! Because of their smaller stomach capacity and tremendous energy needs, kids require frequent meals and snacks. Behavior problems at times are merely the result of an empty stomach.

Somehow, “snacking” has taken on a negative connotation in our society, perhaps because it is often linked with junk food. Done right, snacks can and do make a big contribution to daily nutrition. Healthful snacks should mirror meals—emphasizing healthful foods, but in smaller quantities.

Breakfast is the meal most directly connected to school achievement. Kids who skip breakfast have shorter attention spans, do poorly in tasks requiring concentration, and even score lower on standard achievement tests.

When researchers compared the diets of children who regularly eat breakfast with those who don’t, they found that the breakfast skippers never fully compensate for the missed meal throughout the day. Children who ate a morning meal took in far more nutrients over the course of the day than those who missed breakfast.

- Young bodies need to move! Nutrition studies show that the increasing problem of childhood obesity stems more from inactivity than overeating. An intricate balance exists between food and physical activity. A nutrition unit will be decidedly lacking if it fails to present the exercise part of the equation. Kids enjoy learning about nutrition when it is presented from a fitness perspective. That’s why Chapter 11 is devoted to nutrition as part of the physical education curriculum. Physical fitness should also be part of the daily classroom routine, especially in schools that limit PE to once or twice weekly.

- If children are to resist the allure of the media, advertisements, and other societal influences, they must learn to identify the intent of the messages. Even very young children can grasp the basic purpose of advertising (to sell us stuff!). Older children will enjoy homework they really can do in front of the T.V., i.e. analyze and critique food ads!

Role playing is a very effective way to teach children the messages of the media and encourage the development of critical thinking and decision-making skills. Chapter nine outlines several strategies for helping children to analyze and re-create the food messages they hear each day from TV, radio, magazines, and peers.