



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

At our preschool, we place a high priority on proper nutrition. Our snacks include fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low fat dairy products. We don't ever serve sugary sweets. This includes birthday celebrations, which we've chosen to commemorate by sharing a book or activity, rather than cupcakes or candy. During snack time, we talk to the children about healthy choices and why we eat the foods we do. Healthy eating can stabilize children's energy, sharpen their minds, and even out their moods. By encouraging healthy eating habits now, you can make a huge impact on your children's lifelong relationship with food and give them the best opportunity to grow into healthy, confident adults.

Children develop a natural preference for the foods they enjoy the most, so the challenge is to make healthy choices appealing. Of course, no matter how good your intentions, it's always going to be difficult to convince your three-year-old that an apple is as sweet a treat as a cookie. However, you *can* ensure that your children's diet is as nutritious and wholesome as possible, even while allowing for some of their favorite treats.

The childhood impulse to imitate is strong, so it's important you act as a role model for your kids. It's no good asking your child to eat fruit and vegetables while you gorge on potato chips and soda.

### **Nutritional needs of toddlers and young children**

- An important part of a toddler's diet is calcium (they need about 500 mg/day), and the best source of this nutrient is milk. Until the age of two they should drink whole milk, but older toddlers can usually switch to 2% or skim milk if approved by your pediatrician. If your kids are lactose intolerant or don't like dairy, incorporate calcium-rich foods like fortified soy products, cereals, and orange juice.
- Toddlers need 7mg a day to prevent iron deficiency, which can affect growth, learning, and behavior. In infancy, breast-milk has a readily-absorbed type of iron, and baby formula and food is usually iron-fortified, so babies don't need to worry about getting enough iron. After switching to "real" food, it's important to ensure that your child is eating good sources of iron like fortified cereals, small amounts of red meat or eggs.

## Top tips to promote healthy childhood eating

- **Have regular family meals.** Knowing dinner is served at approximately the same time every night and that the entire family will be sitting down together is comforting and enhances appetite. Breakfast is another great time for a family meal, especially since kids who eat breakfast tend to do better in school.
- **Cook more meals at home.** Eating home cooked meals is healthier for the whole family and sets a great example for kids about the importance of food. . Also, children enjoy helping adults to shop for groceries, selecting what goes in their lunch box, and preparing dinner. It's a chance for you to teach them about the nutritional values of different foods, and (for older children) how to read food labels. Restaurant meals tend to have more fat, sugar, and salt.
- **Make a variety of healthy snacks available instead of empty calorie snacks.** Keep plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grain snacks, and healthy beverages (water, milk, pure fruit juice) around and easily accessible so kids become used to reaching for healthy snacks instead of empty calorie snacks like soda, chips, or cookies.
- **Limit portion sizes.** Don't insist your child cleans the plate, and never use food as a reward or bribe. Teaching children to listen to their body's signals of hunger and fullness helps them throughout their lives. Children are often ravenous one day and not hungry at all the next. As long as their diet is varied over the course of several days, that is fine.

## How to get a picky child to enjoy a wider variety of foods

Picky eaters are going through a normal developmental stage, exerting control over their environment and expressing concern about trusting the unfamiliar. Many picky eaters also prefer a "separate compartmented plate," where one type of food doesn't touch another. Just as it takes numerous repetitions for advertising to convince an adult consumer to buy, it takes most children 8-10 presentations of a new food before they will openly accept it.

Rather than simply insist your child eat a new food, try the following:

- Offer a new food only when your child is hungry and rested.
- Present only one new food at a time.
- Serve new foods with favorite foods to increase acceptance.
- Limit beverages. Picky eaters often fill up on liquids instead.

In school, we have children lick a new food rather than requiring them to eat it at first. Often they find that they like the taste. Then we encourage them to take a bite. For some children, texture is a bigger barrier to new foods than the actual taste. So we make connections between similar foods of all textures. Fresh apples, dried apples, applesauce and apple juice are all healthy apple products, but the textures are varied enough to appeal to different children and encourage positive associations with apples.

Along with the mathematics, literacy and Judaism that we teach, starting our students off on the right foot nutritionally is an important goal we have set for all of our children.