Best Practices for Nutrition in Early Care and Education Settings

These nutrition best practices represent current science, public health research, and national recommendations for children in early care and education settings. Proper nutrition is essential to promoting optimal growth and development for infants and children of all ages. These recommendations are intended to support early childhood professionals in making healthy choices when developing policies and practices related to nutrition.

Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding

- Ensure that a comfortable space for mothers to breastfeed or express milk is always available.
- Provide sufficient refrigerator and/or freezer space to allow breastfeeding mothers to store expressed breast milk.
- Use responsive feeding techniques when feeding infants, including making eye contact, talking, responding to infants' reactions during feeding and their signs of hunger and fullness.
- Follow CDC guidelines (www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding) for proper handling and storage of breast milk.
- When serving infant foods, offer cereal that is iron-fortified, and avoid foods that contain added salt and sugar.
- Follow safe handling and storage guidelines if serving infant formula. For more information on safe handling/storage of infant formula and for infant feeding recommendations, refer to the USDA resource Feeding Infants: A Guide for Use in the Child Nutrition Programs. (www.fns.usda.gov/tn/feeding-infants-guide-use-child-nutrition-programs)

Foods Provided

Fruits

- Provide children with fresh, frozen, canned in natural juices or dried fruits at every meal.
- Introduce kids to a variety of fruit choices, especially fresh fruits. Each fruit has its own unique flavor and nutrients, which helps children get the nutrition they need.

Vegetables

- Provide fresh, frozen or canned vegetables for children at every meal. If using canned vegetables, choose low-sodium options or rinse prior to cooking to reduce the sodium content.
- Vary the vegetables you serve, as each vegetable contains different amounts of nutrients and fiber.
- Brighten children's plate often with dark-green, red, and orange vegetables.

Meat and Meat Alternatives

- Fish and seafood (fresh, frozen, or canned) are good choices for meal time.
- Purchase lean meats (90/10 ground meats), including beef, poultry, pork, and lamb.
- Offer unsalted, chopped, or finely ground nuts and seeds and nut butter (spread thinly).
- Vary the choices of cooked, canned, or frozen dry beans and peas.
- Yogurt and cheese can be credited as a meat alternate.
- Avoid processed, fried and pre-fried meats as they tend to be higher in sodium and fat.

Grains

- Offer at least half of all grains as whole grains.
- Avoid sugary breakfast cereals. Aim to serve breakfast cereals that contain no more than 6 grams of sugar per ounce.
- Rarely serve grain-based desserts, such as brownies, cakes, cupcakes, cookies, etc.

Milk and Other Beverages

- Serve whole milk to children 12 to 24 months and skim milk (non-fat) or 1% (low-fat) milk for children 2 years and older.
- Limit fruit juice. Do not serve fruit juice before 12 months of age. Serve no more than 1/2 cup to 3/4 cup (4 oz to 6 oz) per day to children ages 1 to 6 years of age.
- Offer water throughout the day. Have it readily available and visible so children ask for water when thirsty.
- Do not offer sugary drinks, such as fruit drinks, sports drinks, and others with added sugar.

Preparation and Safety

- Rinse all produce thoroughly under running water before eating, cutting, or cooking.
- Cook foods to the proper internal temperature. Use a thermometer to check. temperatures to determine when a meat, fish, poultry, or egg dish is fully cooked.
- Cold food should be held at below 40°F and warm foods should be held above 140°F.
- Keep produce and ready to eat foods separate from raw meat while shopping, preparing, or storing them to limit the chances of food borne illnesses.
- Supervise young children whenever they're eating or drinking. Kids typically can't make any noise to alert you that they're choking.
- Limit the use of high-sodium foods. Use herbs and spices for flavor instead of adding salt.
- Condiments such as soy sauce, ketchup, and ranch dressing can be high in sodium. Offer only small portions, if using.
- Ask parents if they know of any food allergies that their child may have and document their answer along with a plan of care, if needed. Be mindful that the most common food allergies are peanuts, milk, eggs, soy, wheat, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish.

Feeding Practices

- Praise children for trying new or less-preferred foods. Do not bribe or offer treats to encourage children to try new foods.
- Before removing plates or offering seconds, ask children if they are hungry or full in order to help children understand their feelings of hunger or fullness. Do not require children to clean their plates.
- Use a feeding style that strives to balance encouraging children to eat healthy foods and allowing children to make their own foods choices.

Meal Environment

- Provide family style meals as often as possible, so children who are developmentally ready can serve most or all foods themselves.
- Be an enthusiastic role model for eating healthy foods to children during meals and snacks. Avoid eating or drinking unhealthy foods in front of children.
- Utilize a variety of posters, books, healthy play foods, and other learning materials to promote healthy eating.

Sources and Resources

1. *Nutrition and Wellness Tips for Young Children: Provider Handbook for CACFP www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nutrition-and-wellness-tips-young-children-provider-handbook-child-and-adult-care-food-program*
2. *Let's Move! Child Care: www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org*
3. *USDA Team Nutrition Child Care Provider Resources: www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition*
4. *USDA MyPlate: www.choosemyplate.gov*
5. *NAP SACC Resources and Self-Assessments www.gonapsacc.org*
6. *Child Care Aware® of North Dakota Infant and Toddler Care – Feeding Guidelines www.ndchildcare.org/providers/health-safety/infant-toddler.html*
7. *Infant Feeding Tip sheet: Feeding Your Baby in the First Year http://wicworks.nal.usda.gov/wicworks/Topics/infantfeedingtipsheet.pdf*

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