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Food for Your Preschool Child
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Portia Morris, Extension Specialist, Foods and Nutrition
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Extension Bulletin 588

Home and Family Series



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food for your preschool child

BY PORTIA MORRIS

Extension Specialist, Foods and Nutrition

THE IMPORTANT JOB of feeding your preschooler can be fun for both parents and children. It needn't be a battle of "wills and won'ts." Start in by working *with*, not against, the principles of growth and development. According to these principles, you can expect your child to:

1. **Be himself.** Each child is unique although he follows the same general pattern as other children; he will be different, have different preferences, acquire eating skills at an earlier or later age, consume larger or smaller amounts of food, like foods another youngster rejects. Don't expect him to be a copy of an older brother or sister or neighbor's child.

2. **Become increasingly independent.** He will want to pour his milk, serve himself, butter his bread or toast. Let him; be tolerant of his awkwardness.

3. **Vary from day to day.** Some days your child will eat more than other days. Occasionally he may even reject foods that have been definite favorites.

4. **Learn by doing.** Early attempts at feeding himself result in spills. He will be messy while he learns the skills of eating. As he practices and becomes more skillful, he will advance out of the untidy stage into acceptable ways of eating.

The food your child eats can help him be healthy, happy, growing, alert. Heredity may set the limits of your child's potential, but the food he eats is a most important environmental factor in determining whether or not he achieves his maximum for growth and development. Parents everywhere want the best

The Picture on the Cover — By the end of the preschool years, eating skills have progressed so that the child can handle utensils with ease.

Photographs in this bulletin were taken at the Michigan State University Laboratory Preschool.

for their children — the most desirable nutrition starts a child on the road to achievement and happiness.

What does a child need? — The same nutrients as the adult and infant but less than an adult and more than an infant. These nutrients — carbohydrates, fats, protein, vitamins and minerals — are found in everyday foods.

In order to insure a suitable supply of nutrients and yet be in keeping with the usual American food patterns, it is helpful to select from the "Basic Four". This is a grouping of foods so that those in the same group are roughly the equivalent of each other in terms of the nutrients they supply.

The "Basic Four"

Group I: The milk group — milk, non-fat dry milk, cheese, ice cream, milk drinks.

Group II: The meat group — meat, fish, eggs, dried peas.

Group III: The fruit and vegetable group — especially rich in vitamin C; the green leafy and yellow vegetables which are especially rich in vitamin A; and other fruits and vegetables which contain lesser amounts of other vitamins and minerals.

Group IV: The cereal group — cereal, bread, noodles, pasta. These are excellent sources of energy-yielding nutrients and the "B-complex" vitamins.

How the Basic Four Can Work for Your Child

Food Group	Amounts of Food per Group		
	Child's Age		
	12 to 24 months	24-42 months	3½ to 4 years
I. Milk	2 to 3 cups	3 cups	3½ cups
II. Meats, eggs, etc.	2 servings	2 servings, 2 ounces each	3 servings, 2 ounces each
III. Vegetables and Fruits	3 servings, 1 to 2 table- spoons each	3 servings, ¼ cup each	4-5 servings, ¼ cup each
IV. Cereals and Bread	2 servings	3 servings, 1 ounce each	3 servings

Fats and sweets (as desired in addition to other foods.)

The table above indicates the amounts of the various food groups which are reasonable expectations for preschool children. Except for calories, these amounts will provide the needed nutrients. Additional calories can be provided by extra amounts of

the four food groups or by fats and sweets.

The development of a child sets the pace for the amount of food he needs. His size, his age and rate of growth, and his activity dictate the amount of the various nutrients he should have.

The Premium For Nutrition Insurance

To like and use a variety of food is good nutrition insurance. Studies have shown that those who have adequate diets eat a larger number of items than those whose diets were rated "poor."

How can you help a preschooler acquire a fondness for many foods? One way is to introduce the new food under the most auspicious circumstances. Set the stage carefully, for he is apt to accept the new food if:

1. —**he's not overly tired or excited.** A tired child is apt to respond negatively to new situations, including new foods. Fatigue can cause both rebellion and resistance to change; neither emotional state will help him decide that he likes a new food.

2. —**he sees others eating and enjoying the food.** Enthusiasm is contagious. When a child sees others obviously relishing a new item, he is stimulated to try it because he doesn't want to miss out on a "good thing." Nursery schools have made use of this idea

by seating fussy eaters at the same table or next to children who readily accept many foods. On the other hand, if he sees others reject an item he is very apt to decide he doesn't want to try it. Parents and older brothers and sisters are important examples to preschool children. The youngsters copy food habits as well as the mannerisms of others.

3. —**the emotional climate of mealtime is happy, secure, leisurely.** Pleasant conversation in which the child is included generates feelings of security and pleasure. This in turn makes the new food more acceptable.

4. —**portions are small.** A plate heaped high with an unknown food overwhelms a child. A small amount is enticing.

5. —**he helps with the preparation.** Being involved even as little as opening the box, can make frozen vegetables seem more interesting to a two-year-old.

Young children do have preferences. Some foods are more popular than others. It is a good rule to serve only one of the less popular foods at a meal. If the meat is one your child is not enthusiastic about, be sure the vegetables are ones he likes.

Highly seasoned foods are too irritating to young palates to be popular. Less pepper, spice, and condiments will help your young child to enjoy the flavors of such dishes as chili and pizza.

Crunchy foods are high on the preference list of most young children. They like both the sound and



feel when eating toast, carrot sticks, and celery. Bread, cooked carrots and celery are not nearly as popular as the crunchy forms of these foods.

The preferred temperature for cooked foods is but little warmer than lukewarm. Young children fear hot foods and do not reject foods because they are cold. Chilled milk and ice cream they enjoy.

Foods that are hard to eat, such as tough meat, may be rejected. But the same meat diced or ground will win instant approval.



Children react differently to food. How they react is conditioned by the food as well as how they feel about themselves, the people around them, and the emotional climate of the situation. On the left is a boy whose thoughts and interests are far, far from the food at hand. In contrast, the girl on the right is interested in eating with relish to satisfy a normal appetite.

Questions Parents Ask . . .

Shall I let my preschool child snack?

Snacking seems to be a way of life for modern Americans. The coffee break, the cocktail hour, nibbling while watching TV or athletic contests, and social refreshments are on the increase. The preschool child is subject to the same social pressures that encourage frequent eating, plus the physiological one of a small capacity. Quite literally, his stomach may

not have sufficient capacity to hold one third of his daily food needs.

Consider snacks as part of the daily food intake, not something eaten in addition to regular meals. Thus, if your preschooler eats many snacks each day, you may expect the amount of food he eats at meal time will be less. Be sure that the snacks are varied,

and include foods that are at least somewhat balanced with respect to the nutrients which they contain. A child that snacks all day long on a single item, such as crackers, is almost certainly less well nourished than a child whose daily food intake includes all four groups of the daily food guide.

Many foods that are easily prepared and eaten make nutritious snacks. Such a list might include fresh fruit sections as apple wedges or orange segments; milk; carrot sticks; meats; peanut butter or cheese sandwiches; cauliflowerrets; dried fruit; hard cooked eggs; ready-to-eat cereal served with or without milk.

To encourage meal consumption and reduce the number of snacks eaten, you may find the following suggestions helpful:

1. Make meals interesting, pleasant, and regular, so the child will eat enough to last three or four hours.

2. Discourage snacking within an hour of meal time. Diversion is a useful device in working with preschool children. If you can get the young child busy and interested in some other activity just prior to meal time, this makes the waiting easier. If the father enjoys playing with the preschool children just before supper, this is a big boon to the mother preparing the meal.

3. Provide the child with a suitable example. If others in the family are not frequent snack eaters, the preschool child will be less likely to want food between meals.

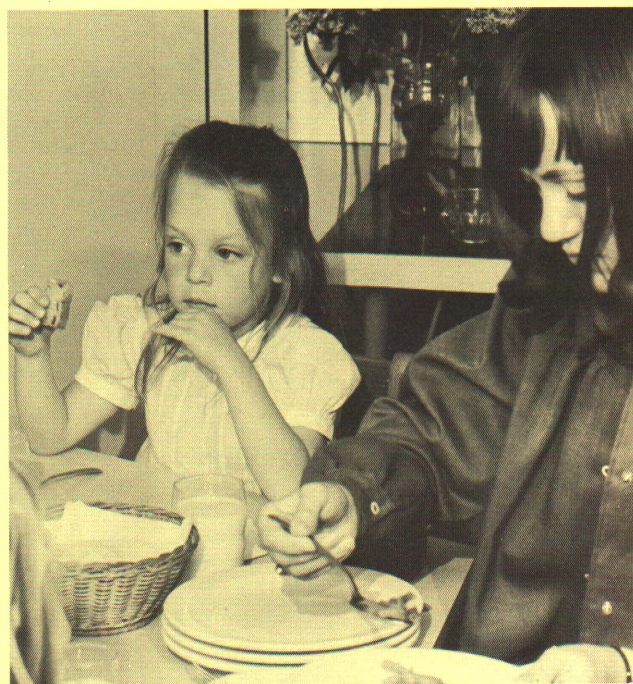
Should I give a vitamin preparation to my preschool child?

There is no doubt that your child needs vitamins—the question revolves around *how* he is to get them.

Nutritionists and the medical profession agree that the best way to get these nutrients is by eating a wide variety of everyday food. Not only does the child get vitamins but the same foods provide the protein, fats, carbohydrates, and minerals which he also needs.

Recent research shows the harmful effects of too much of the fat-soluble vitamins A and D. The amount of these necessary to cause undesirable effects is greater than that which would result from eating normal amounts of foods, but can result from the injudicious use of high-potency vitamin supplements. Those infrequent instances when illness or some other condition has interfered with normal utilization of nutrients are best determined by the physician.

The normal child who eats a wide variety of foods from the Basic Four food groups does not need



The enthusiasm of others at mealtime is an important influence on your child's attitude toward food and eating.

additional vitamin supplements, now that milk is commonly fortified with vitamin D.

Should the preschool child eat with the family or at his own table?

The young child learns much by eating with other members of the family. Eating skills, cultural attitudes and values, the ability to express his ideas are greatly enhanced by his association with others during meal time. He hears ideas expressed which contribute to his understanding of many subjects in the world around him. He expresses his needs and desires which improves his speech and vocabulary. As he imitates others using fork, knife, and spoon he becomes more skilled in the eating patterns of our culture.

Food offers sensory stimulation. When with the family group the child is prompted to express his reactions to the odor, flavor, color, and texture of food. If he eats alone, the flavors and aromas may be unnoticed, or he is not apt to comment upon them.

With the more relaxed ways of modern living, many families eat meals in front of the TV and in other very informal settings. These can provide the same experiences of the more formal family dinner table if the situation provides for interaction among the family members. The family picnic, meals eaten in the car at the drive-in restaurant, and similar

situations provide experiences that are valuable to the young child when parents and others choose to include all family members in conversation and activity.

The inevitable messiness of a child just learning to feed himself can be minimized by using dishes and utensils which are easily manipulated. These include:

- broad based cups with large handles;
- small glasses which the child can grasp in his hand;
- plates with a rim against which food may be pushed;
- short handled knives and forks.

A piece of sheet plastic placed under his chair will protect both the dining room carpet and mother's disposition.

How can I over-come the tendency of my three-year-old to dawdle at the table?

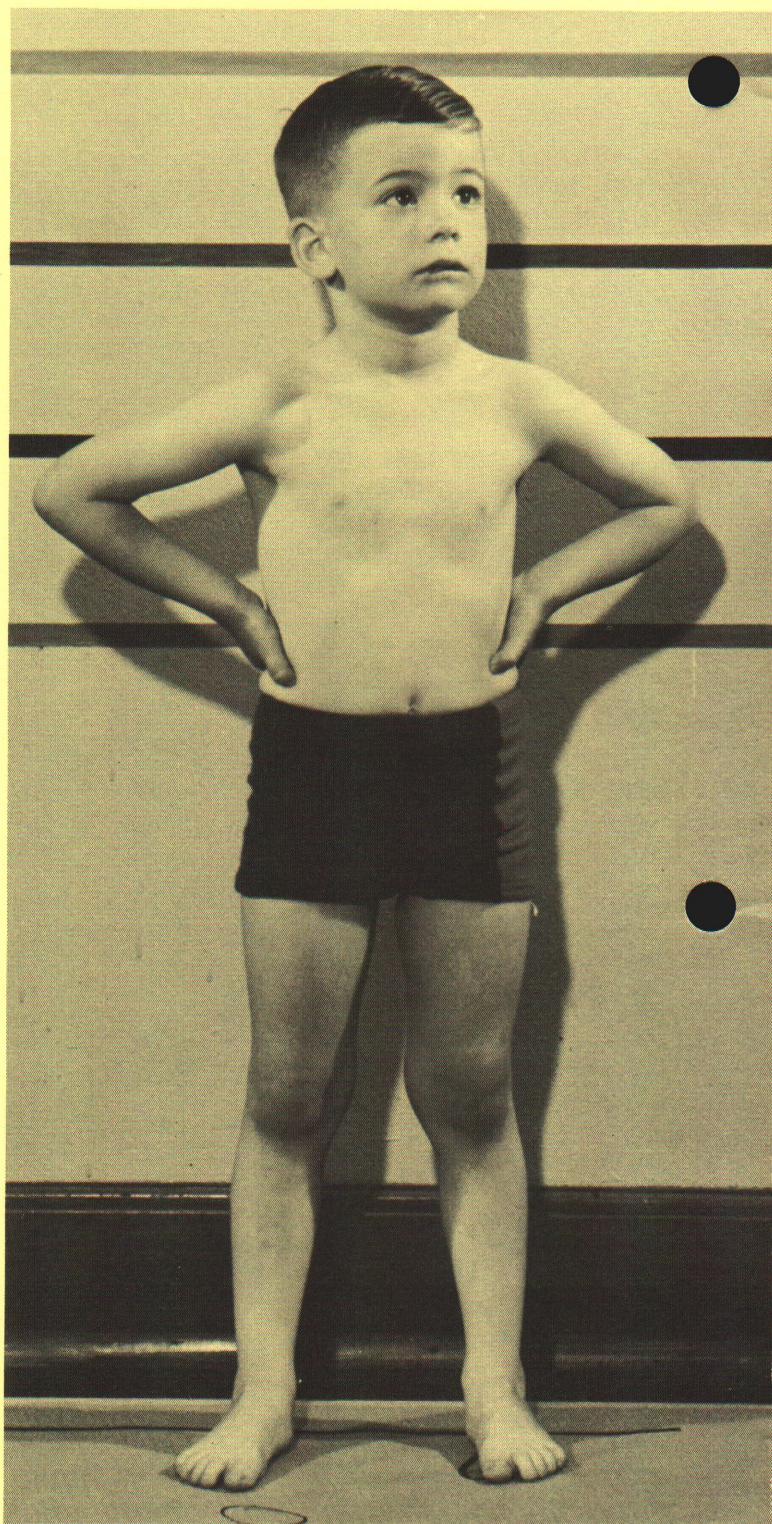
Preschool children eat more slowly than they will a few years later. But if your child is taking more than 30 to 35 minutes to eat a meal, it might be well to consider:

1. Is he dawdling to get extra attention? To a child who feels insecure and ignored, the "Hurry-up, and eat your dinner" which his parent shouts at him is better than no attention at all. Giving him some extra affection besides at meal time may help here.

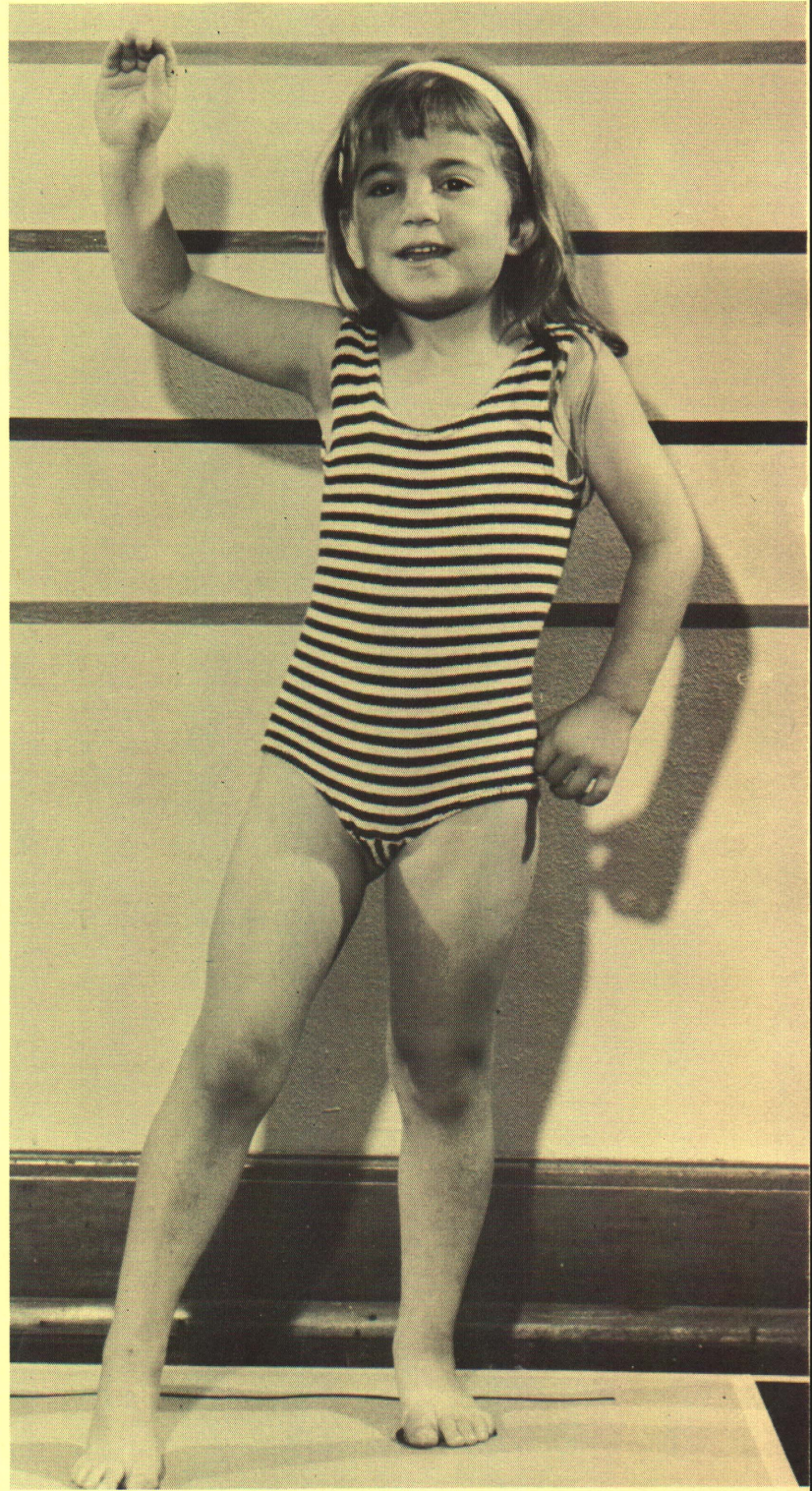
2. Is meal time too exciting? Some preschool children are diverted from eating by the exciting or emotionally charged conversation of adults and older children. Encouraging a calmer but still friendly atmosphere will be beneficial under these circumstances.

3. Is he hungry? A child who snacks all the time may simply be too full to be interested in meals. If this is the case, cut down the number and size of the snacks and space them so that at least one hour elapses between snack and meal time.

4. Does he feel hurried? Especially at breakfast time, many families feel rushed. Setting meal time a few minutes earlier so that the young child is more relaxed may actually cause him to finish eating in fewer minutes.



This trio of preschool youngsters exhibit the visible characteristics of buoyant good health.



Their firm muscles, sound teeth, good color, glossy hair, straight legs, good posture, nicely rounded body would not be possible without adequate nutrition.

Menus That Please Preschoolers and All the Family

	BREAKFAST	LUNCH or SUPPER	DINNER	SNACK SUGGESTIONS
FALL	Grapefruit/pineapple juice Dry cereal Scrambled eggs Toast Milk (coffee — adults)	Cream of potato soup Toasted bacon sandwich Sliced peaches	Swiss steak Steamed rice Buttered beets Celery sticks Sponge cake Apple sauce	Custard with fruit
WINTER	Apple juice Oatmeal Bacon strips Milk (coffee — adults)	Egg, pea and macaroni casserole Celery curls Toast strips Orange slices	Meat patties Baked potato Buttered green beans Chocolate pudding	Milk Apple slices with peanut butter
SPRING	French toast Crisp bacon Milk (coffee — adults)	Creamed salmon Boiled noodles Cabbage wedges Pear	Lamb stew with carrots, potatoes Whole wheat bread Banana-orange fruit cup	Cottage cheese-prune sandwich Milk
SUMMER	Fresh strawberries Enriched dry cereal Brown bread/butter Milk (coffee — adults)	Cream of vegetable soup Peanut butter/lettuce sandwich	Pot roast of beef Summer squash Carrot sticks Mashed potatoes Sherbet Sugar cookie Milk (coffee — adults)	Gingerbread-cheese sandwich Milk