

Eyes on



Eating behaviours

A recipe for healthy eating habits



Centre of Excellence
for Early Childhood
Development

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“When children are introduced to fruits and vegetables early in life, they are more likely to appreciate these nutritious foods when they are older.”

What do we know?

- Newborns depend entirely on adults to be fed. As their motor skills develop, they gradually learn to eat on their own.
- Feeding problems are one of the most common developmental difficulties in healthy children and affect approximately 25% to 50% of children under two years of age.
- The most common forms of feeding problems include an exaggerated or insufficient food intake, unhealthy diet or strange food preference.
- Most problems are mild and short-lived (for example, skipped meals) but roughly 1% to 2% of feeding problems become chronic and can lead to malnutrition.
- Several factors contribute to feeding problems, including genetic predispositions, physiology, temperament and environmental conditions.
- Most feeding problems occur when the child is introduced to new food with an unfamiliar taste, texture, smell, temperature or appearance.
- The diet of many toddlers consists of too few fruits and vegetables and too much high fat and sugary food.
- When children systematically refuse nutritious food, parent-child relationships can become strained and mealtimes can become a major source of stress.
- When children are introduced to fruits and vegetables early in life, they are more likely to appreciate these nutritious foods when they are older.
- Young children tend to react negatively to parents who pressure them to change their unwanted feeding habits, this may contribute to feeding problems.
- Children who watch a lot of television tend to view fast food more positively, and are more likely to have an unhealthy diet because of exposure to food advertisement.
- Persistent feeding problems in young children can be improved through individualized pediatric treatment which can have a positive effect on physical and mental health.

Paying attention to...

What can be done?

... promoting a positive meal-time environment.

- Provide a calm and stress-free environment to your child during meals by avoiding distractions (for example, other ongoing activities or television).
- Give your child enough time to eat (more than 10 minutes) but keep the duration of the meal fairly short (less than 20-30 minutes).
- Eat together and engage in positive interactions with other family members.
- Provide age-appropriate equipment that facilitates self-feeding behaviours (small utensils, high-chair, bib).

... your child's behaviour while feeding.

- Learn to recognize your child's hunger and satiety cues.
- During meals, let your child express when, how much and how fast feeding should occur.
- Facilitate your child's liking for a new food by pairing it with one that he already likes until it becomes familiar.
- Eat healthy nutritious food, such as fruits and vegetables, to model a balanced diet and reduce unhealthy feeding habits.
- Encourage your child to eat slowly by putting his utensils down after each bite.

... the amount of time your child watches television.

- Discourage any TV watching if your child is under 2, and limit it to 1-2 hours of high quality shows daily if your child is over 2.
- Limit your child's exposure to fast food commercials, especially in the early years.
- Talk to your child about the content of food advertisement and lay down rules about food intake.
- Encourage your child's participation in physical activity.
- Seek professional help if your child's weight worries you.



Information

This information sheet is a publication of the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development (SKC-ECD). These organizations identify and summarize the best scientific work on early childhood development. They disseminate this knowledge to a variety of audiences in formats and languages adapted to their needs.

For a more in-depth understanding of eating behaviours, consult our synthesis and experts' articles on this topic in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, available free of charge at www.child-encyclopedia.com.

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Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development

Université de Montréal
3050, Édouard-Montpetit Blvd., GRIP
P.O. Box 6128, succursale Centre-ville
Montreal, Quebec H3C 3J7
Telephone: 514.343.6111, extension 2541
Fax: 514.343.6962
E-mail: cedje-ceecd@umontreal.ca
Websites: www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca and www.skc-eecd.ca

Coordinator:
Valérie Bell

Collaborators:
Myles Faith
Marie-Pierre Gosselin
Kristell Le Martret

Copy editor:
Lana Crossman

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In this document, the masculine form is used merely to simplify the text. No discrimination is intended.



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