



For The Early Learning Centre Sector

Nutrition Fact Sheet

Promoting Food Diversity In Early Childhood



Early childhood is a critical time for establishing lifelong eating habits and preferences. Promoting food diversity during this time is essential for ensuring children receive a balanced diet that supports growth, development and overall health. In this fact sheet, we explore why food diversity is important, strategies to encourage diverse eating habits, and tips for creating a positive mealtime experience for young children.

Key Messages -

- Early childhood is a critical time for establishing lifelong eating habits.
- Food habits that are formed in childhood are often followed through into adulthood.
- Food diversity is important to encourage nutritional adequacy and preventing nutrient deficiencies, palate development, and encourage an appreciation of cultural foods.
- Strategies to promote food diversity include offering a variety of different coloured fruits and vegetables, including food from each of the five food groups, cooking and eating together and trying cultural foods.

Why Is Food Diversity Important?

Research indicates that eating patterns and habits established in early childhood tend to persist into adulthood. Therefore, it is

important to instill healthy eating habits at a young age to promote food diversity as children mature. Overtime, developing these habits early can significantly lower the risk of chronic diseases later in life.

Limited food variety can lead to nutrients deficiencies. By offering a diverse range of foods, it helps to reduce the risk of deficiencies that can occur and supports optimal health and immunity. Different foods provide varying nutrients essential for growth and development. Encouraging a variety of fruits, vegetables, protein, whole grains and dairy ensures that children receive a broad spectrum of vitamins, minerals and other vital nutrients.

Early exposure to diverse flavours and textures helps to expand children's palates and encourage acceptance of new foods. This can help to reduce picky eating behavior and increases willingness to try new foods later in life.

Additionally, introducing children to foods from different cultures promotes cultural awareness and diversity can foster a sense of curiosity and openness to different culinary traditions.



Strategies To Promote Food Diversity

1. **Offer a variety of colours** - Encourage children to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables of different colours. This not only ensures a range of nutrients but also makes meals visually appealing.
2. **Rotate food choices** - Regularly introduce new foods alongside familiar favorites. Gradually increase exposure to less familiar foods to encourage acceptance.
3. **Include foods from different food groups** - Aim for a balanced plate that includes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, dairy/dairy alternatives. This provides a good mixture of nutrients.
4. **Cook and eat together** - Involve children in meal preparation and cooking activities. This increases their interest in food and makes them more likely to try new things.
5. **Celebrate cultural foods** - Explore foods from different cultures. Share traditional recipes and foods during special occasions.

6. Model healthy eating habits - Children learn by example, so demonstrate positive eating behaviours such as enjoying a variety of foods and showing enthusiasm for trying new things.



In Summary

Promoting food diversity in early childhood is crucial for supporting overall health, expanding palates, and fostering cultural appreciation. By introducing children to a wide array of nutritious foods from an early age and creating positive meal time experiences, caregivers and educators play an important role in establishing lifelong healthy eating habits. Through these efforts, we can ensure that every child has the opportunity to enjoy a diverse and nutritious diet that supports their growth and development.

For more information, please visit:

Nutrients: Tracking Dietary Patterns over 20 Years from Childhood through Adolescence into Young Adulthood: The Saskatchewan Pediatric Bone Mineral Accrual Study
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5622750/>
Healthy Eating Advisory Service; Introducing New Foods To Children
<https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/introducing-new-foods-to-children-1.pdf>

