

The Director's Link

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More Than Apple Juice and Crackers: Promoting Better Nutrition in Preschool

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and Stephanie Scarmo



Across the country, the subject of childhood obesity has become the focus of attention. Earlier this year, President Obama signed an executive order creating a federal childhood obesity task force and first lady Michelle Obama launched the *Let's Move!* campaign to inspire young children to get active and eat healthy. At the same time, Jamie Oliver hit the airwaves with his television show *Food Revolution*, targeting school lunch programs as a prime example of good intentions gone wrong. With over 11 million children younger than five in child care across the country, what better place to concentrate our nutrition efforts than in our early care and education programs.

More than one-quarter of U.S. children between the ages of 2 and 5 are currently overweight or obese. The number of obese preschool children has nearly tripled in the past 30 years, and children from low-income communities are at the highest risk. Sadly, the majority of preschool children have diets too high in added sugar and fat, and too low in fruits, vegetables, and fiber.

What We Know About How Children Eat

Even as babies, children prefer sweet, salty, and high-calorie foods. Many years ago, when food was sparse and survival

depended on getting enough calories, these foods helped us survive. Unfortunately, our innate preferences get us in trouble today because we are surrounded by unhealthy foods nearly everywhere we go.

Self-regulation. Can children naturally eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full? Yes and no. Yes, if all of the options are healthy ones. But if there is an abundance of sweet, high-fat, and salty foods, the answer is no—children will overeat. It's simply unfair to put a combination of healthy and treat foods out for snacks and expect children to walk past the cookies and choose the apple instead. Give them choices, yes, but make all of the options healthy ones.

Visibility. We all eat more when food is visible. Researcher Brian Wansink at Cornell University tested this by placing candies in either clear glass or opaque containers. Guess which candies were eaten faster? Right, you eat more candy when you can see it in the container all day long.

Accessibility. In the same candy study, Wansink also found that people ate almost twice as much candy when the dish was placed within arm's length on their desk, compared to when it was placed six feet away. So, keep the healthy foods close by and keep the treats out of sight.

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Portion sizes. We eat more when we are served larger portions, and portion sizes for unhealthy foods are increasing. Think about it, you are asked to supersize your soda or fries but has anyone ever suggested that you supersize that watermelon or bag of apples? Keep portions of healthy foods big and portions of unhealthy foods small. It may seem like a better deal to get the larger portion for a little more money, but you pay another type of price if you eat too much.

Variety. Have you ever eaten too much at a buffet because you had to try some of everything? Or, have you ever been full from dinner but then suddenly had the desire to eat more when the waiter brought the dessert tray? Barbara Rolls at Penn State calls this “sensory specific satiety”—you have had enough of one flavor, but want more of a new flavor. Use this to your advantage when feeding children. Offer multiple flavors of healthy foods like fruits and vegetables, but offer treats only one at a time.

Food as a reward. Research shows that when you reward children with foods like candy or ice cream, you are training them to like these foods even more, and to ignore their natural feelings of hunger or fullness. There are many non-food ways to reward children—the best is attention and verbal praise.

Food marketing. Children see advertising through television commercials, licensed characters on prepackaged foods, toys in fast food meals, and even branded educational materials. A Yale study found that children significantly preferred the taste of foods if there was a popular licensed cartoon character on the package. Only allow characters into your classroom that promote healthy foods.

How Can We Improve Children's Diets?

One part of solving the childhood obesity crisis is educating people about making healthy choices. While this is important, we believe that real and lasting change will only come if we modify our environment so that healthy eating is the default. In other words, it needs to be easier, less expensive, and

more appealing to eat healthy foods, and harder, more expensive, and less appealing to eat unhealthy foods.

We need strong policies to optimize nutrition for our children. Some ideas include selling only healthy foods and beverages in schools, having non-food celebrations in class, not using food as a reward, and limiting portion sizes.

Part of becoming a child advocate for sensible food policies for young children is knowing how to counter some of the common concerns that are expressed when more healthy policies are implemented. Here are a few retorts you are sure to hear:

“You’re going to make things worse. Restricting snack foods will lead to binge eating at home.” The comment here seems to imply that “absence makes the heart grow fonder” when it comes to chips or soda. In our own research we have studied how food eaten at school influences food eaten at home. We found that when specific unhealthy items were removed from schools, children did not compensate by eating more of those restricted items later at home. So, when it comes to snacks and desserts at schools, the motto should be, “out of sight, out of mind.”

“But it says on the box that it’s a healthy choice!” The food marketing industry is clever so watch out for misleading nutrition and health claims. Our group at Yale looked at every cereal box out there and found that children’s cereals had significantly more calories, sodium, carbohydrates, and sugar, and far less fiber and protein than adult cereals. Despite this, the boxes said: whole grain, low fat, and contains vitamins and minerals. Be skeptical—if a product is marketed to kids, it probably has added sugar and artificial colors and flavors.

“Come on, birthdays are only once a year!” Eliminating cupcakes from birthday and other celebrations may seem harsh, but there are about 20 birthdays per classroom, plus Valentine’s Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, winter holiday parties, end-of-the-year parties, 4th of July...you see where this is going. Children love to celebrate, but they don’t need sweet treats to have a good time.

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Our Mission

The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership is dedicated to enhancing the management skills, professional orientation, and leadership capacity of early childhood administrators. The activities of the Center encompass four areas: training and technical assistance, program evaluation, research, and public awareness.

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Coping with Picky Eating

How to deal with picky eaters is a common concern among early childhood directors and teachers. A few children may be diagnosed as clinical picky eaters, but for the majority of children this is a normal developmental stage. Picky eating is often worse in preschool-age children because they have reached an age where they can start to communicate their food likes and dislikes. Here are some useful tips to help cope with picky eaters in the classroom:

Relax. Picky eating can create frustrating struggles between children and teachers, but children are more likely to try new foods when everyone around them is relaxed.

Bring children to the table hungry. Children will be more willing to try new foods when they are hungry. Take advantage of this by introducing a new or less preferred food after a busy play time and before the rest of the meal.

Offer a variety of foods at each meal. Greater variety encourages greater intake, so provide healthy options at each meal. If children are resisting fruits and vegetables, present them with a few colorful options.

Serve new and familiar foods together. A new food may not look as new if it's combined with a familiar food. Try pairing a new food with a food children already like, such as putting green peppers on pizza.

Be persistent with new foods. It takes several exposures to a new food for children to accept it. The more children keep trying the taste of a particular food, the more likely they will learn to like it.

One day's intake does not predict the next. Children can be very inconsistent and unpredictable with their eating. They may happily eat a food one day, and then refuse to touch it the next. Don't give up—they may very well eat it again a week later.

Proximity is important. We eat what is in front of us. Put the foods you want children to try on their plates and keep the serving dishes containing the new foods on the table during the meal.

You can have rules about trying everything on the plate. We do not recommend having rules about cleaning plates, but you can tell children they need to at least taste everything being served. This allows children to get used to new flavors, while helping them identify when they are full.

Be a role model. The most important strategy an early childhood educator can use to cope with picky eating is to be a good role model. Children will imitate what you do!

Marlene Schwartz, Ph.D. and Stephanie Scarmo, Ph.D., Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale University

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Think of creative ways to celebrate without extra food.

“It's part of our culture to celebrate with food.” Every culture celebrates with food, but that doesn't need to mean it has to be unhealthy food. Enjoy and celebrate ethnically diverse foods, but focus on the main dishes, not desserts. The best way to teach children how to eat is to create an environment that promotes good health. Teachers and parents can

serve as role models by enthusiastically eating healthy foods.

By changing the environment from one that promotes eating sugary and salty foods to one that encourages healthy eating, we can help our preschoolers develop healthy habits that stay with them through adulthood.

Painter, J. E., Wansink, B., & Hieggelke, (2002, June). How visibility and convenience influence candy consumption, *Appetite*, (38)3, 23738.

Rudd Center for Food Policy, (2010). Licensed characters on food packaging affect kids' taste preferences, snack selections, *Yale University Office of Public Affairs Bulletin*. <http://opa.yale.edu/news/article.aspx?id=7329&f=65>

Marlene Schwartz Ph.D., serves as the Deputy Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University. Stephanie Scarmo, Ph.D., is a Research Associate at the Rudd Center.

Do You Practice What You Preach?

No doubt about it, early childhood teachers and administrators are powerful role models for young children when it comes to good nutrition. With the laudable goal of reducing childhood obesity and encouraging healthy eating for children, it is important that we embrace healthy habits ourselves. For example, if you serve food at your staff meeting, why not start offering more healthful choices. A nutritious salad with grilled chicken for lunch and fresh fruit for dessert is a great example. Or host a potluck asking your teachers to each bring their favorite healthy contribution to share with the group. Snacking on fruits and vegetables, especially in front of the children, is a great way to teach by example.

Fortunately, there are many good resources offering encouragement and helpful strategies. Here are a few to get you started.

Books and Articles:

- Pollan, M. (2009). *Food rules: An eater's manual*. Penguin Group USA.
- Chamberlain, J. (2010, June). Eat, play, love: An interview with Barbara Fiese. *Monitor on Psychology*, 41(6), 32.
- Kalich, K., Bauer, D., & McPartlin, D. (2010). *Early sprouts: Cultivating healthy food choices in young children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press. (<http://www.earlysprouts.org>)

Web Resources:

- The Green Smoothie Challenge (<http://www.greensmoothiechallenge.com>)
- American Academy of Pediatrics (<http://www.healthychildren.org>)
- Children's Environmental Health Network (<http://www.cehn.org>)
- Healthy Living Resource (http://cecl.nl.edu/public/healthy_living.pdf)
- Organic School Project (<http://www.organicschoolproject.org/programs>)
- Green Mountain Farm to School Program (<http://www.greenmountainfarmtoschool.org>)
- National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education (<http://nrckids.org>)
- Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University (<http://www.yaleruddcenter.org>)
- Baylor College of Medicine USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center (<http://www.bcm.edu/cnrc/consumer/nyc/healthyeating.htm>)

DVDs:

- King Corn (2008)
- Food Inc. (2008)

Food Sources:

- Growing Power, Inc. (<http://www.growingpower.org>)
- Timber Creek Farm Organics (<http://www.tcforganics.net>)

Recipes:

- Family-Treasured Recipes (<http://www.family-treasured-recipes.com/healthy-recipes.html>)
- Feeding America: The Historic Cookbook Project (<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks>)
- Household Encyclopedia (http://www/The_Household_Cyclopedia_of_General_Information/old-fashioned-recipes.html)
- In Mama's Kitchen (http://www.inmamaskitchen.com/food_intros/old_recipes.html)
- Old Fashioned Living (<http://oldfashionedliving.com>)



Planning Ahead

Professional Development Opportunities

Business Administration Scale – Assessor Reliability Training

August 23-25, 2010

The Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care (BAS) is a research-based tool for measuring and improving the overall quality of business and professional practices in family child care settings. This three-day training is designed for organizational consultants, resource and referral specialists, family child care network supervisors, and college instructors who are interested in improving the quality of business and professional practices in family child care settings. Participants will learn how the BAS can be used to set goals to incrementally improve business practices that result in better communication with parents, financial stability, reduced risk in operating a home business, and compliance with legal requirements.

Format: Intensive three-day training

Location: McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex

Fee: \$750, includes texts, materials, and meals

Space is limited to 18 participants. Priority is based on date of registration. Participants may receive two semester hours of graduate credit (ECE582C, Early Childhood Program Evaluation) by paying an additional fee and satisfactorily completing an assignment.

Fall Management Institute – Managing Infant-Toddler Programs

October 7-9, 2010

Managing infant-toddler programs is different from managing preschool and school-age programs. This institute, designed for center owners, directors, assistant directors, supervisors, and education coordinators, will focus on the components of program planning, implementation, and evaluation that are different for infant-toddler programs. You will find out how the demands on the director differ and how to adjust your leadership and management style to fit these realities. Presenters for this institute are Dr. Kay M. Albrecht, author of the Innovations series of infant, toddler, and preschool training materials, and Toni Christie, founder of Childspace Early Learning Centres and director of the Childspace Early Childhood Institute in Wellington, New Zealand.

Format: Daily sessions: 8:30 am – 4:30pm

Day 1: Embracing the challenges of managing infant-toddler programs

Day 2: New developments in environmental design (indoors and outdoors)

Day 3: Implementing the unique components of infant and toddler curriculum

Location: McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex

Fee: \$100 per day includes texts, materials, and meals. You can register for an individual day or for the entire Institute

Participants may receive 2 s.h. of graduate credit (ECE582J, The Administration of Infant-Toddler Programs) by paying an additional fee. This course is applicable to the core competency requirements for the Illinois Director Credential.

Program Administration Scale – Assessor Reliability Training

October 19-22, 2010

The Program Administration Scale (PAS) measures leadership and management practices of center-based early care and education programs. Assessor Reliability Training includes an overview of the instrument, how to relate indicators and score items, the protocol for interviewing and collecting data, and procedures for verifying documentation. Individuals who successfully complete the training are eligible to become certified PAS assessors. This four-day training is designed for technical assistance specialists, quality monitors, management, consultants, researchers, and other professionals interested in using the PAS to reliably assess early childhood leadership and management practices.

Format: Intensive four-day training with evening sessions

Location: McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex

Fee: \$1,025 includes all texts, materials, and meals

Space is limited to 18 participants. Priority is based on date of registration. Participants may receive two semester hours of graduate credit (ECE582C, Early Childhood Program Evaluation) by paying an additional fee and satisfactorily completing an assignment.

For more information about these professional development opportunities and a list of local hotels, please contact Debra Trude-Suter at (800) 443-5522, ext. 5056 or debra.trudesuter@nl.edu. You can also register online at <http://cecl.nl.edu>.

LEADERSHIP Connections

Thanks for making our 10th Leadership Connections such a great success!

Alive with the energy of 500 enthusiastic early childhood leaders, the Westin Chicago North Shore was the site of the tenth annual Leadership Connections conference and 25th anniversary celebration of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership. Thanks to all of the presenters and participants who made this year's conference such a memorable event. A special thank you to our sponsors for their generous support:

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