



You are the key to helping kids grow up healthy!

Children learn through imitation and observation. What they see adults do is just as important to learn skills, make choices, and establish habits as being told. When young children are surrounded by adults who practice healthy behaviors, they are more likely to make healthy choices themselves. Through modeling healthy habits for children, early care and education providers support children's learning and health.

Healthy eating

Providers have a strong influence on the foods and beverages children consume. Children in full-day care may eat 50 percent or more of their meals and snacks while at child care. Therefore, it is important for providers to make and promote healthy choices when it comes to meals and snacks. Providers can encourage healthy foods like fruits and vegetables, while also limiting children's intake of unhealthy foods such as fried foods.

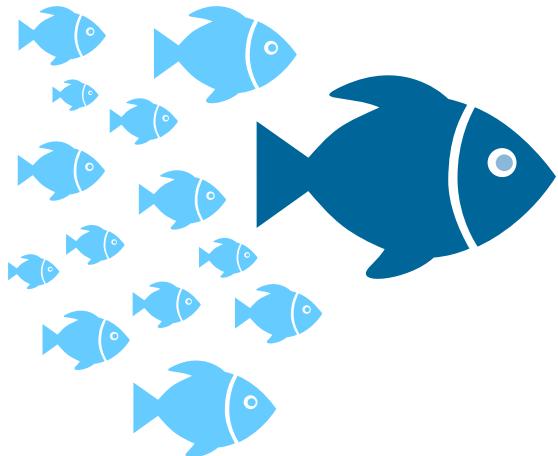
Beverages in particular are a large contributor to children's consumption of "empty calories." Empty calories are calories that have little or no additional nutritional value.

Older infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are in a period of rapid growth and development. They need to eat a variety of nourishing and wholesome foods to meet their developmental needs.

Food preferences develop at an early age. Both the type of foods and beverages and how they are prepared are important for teaching children's taste buds to like nutritious foods.

When providers choose foods and beverages for meals and snacks, they should consider the basic food groups focusing on variety and healthier options within each food group, how often to serve certain foods over the course of a week, and healthier options for preparing food like baking or sautéing over frying.

Family-style dining is a meal service approach that helps ECE programs support children by offering developmentally appropriate mealtime experiences. Family-style dining enriches a child's learning environment and gives children an active role in their feeding by allowing them to make decisions and to take responsibility for their food choices.



Family-style dining also creates a unique opportunity for adults to model healthy food choices and table manners. Children watch everything you do and say. You have an influence on children's eating behaviors by the foods you offer, behaviors you model, and your social interactions with children as they sit and eat their meals and snacks.

As a role model, you should be sure to serve yourself a child's portion of each food at the table, try all of the foods enthusiastically, eat slowly, setting a pace for the children, and enjoy your meal!

Furthermore, for breastfeeding moms, you, the ECE professional, might be the only champion around. For those moms without supportive families or employers, you can be more than just a powerful champion—you can be a hero!

To support breastfeeding moms and their babies, your program can provide a private space for moms to breastfeed (or pump), create a culturally appropriate environment for breastfeeding, and provide children with learning experiences that normalize breastfeeding.

Active play



You are a powerful motivation to young children when they see you engaged in active play and having fun as you are physically active. To the extent that you are physically able, you should be active during both free play and adult-led physical activity. If you are limited in your ability to be active, be a cheerleader!

Be aware of children who might need more support and encouragement to be active during free play times. Gently nudge children who are inactive by suggesting activities that align with their interests and abilities. Encourage and support young children as they practice their gross motor skills and learn new games.

Another way to support active play is to reduce screen time usage and model appropriate use of media. Screen time should be interactive and intentional so that it supports children's learning and interactions with peers. Include screen time only for educational or physical activity purposes and avoid media that includes advertising or branding, especially of less healthy foods.

NOTE: If you choose to utilize screen time in your program for children two years and older, they should have no more than thirty minutes per week of screen time in your program. There should be no screen time for children under two years.



Learn more

To further explore and understand how you can support children to develop healthy habits, check out the *Taking Steps to Healthy Success OnDemand* series. The series includes practical ideas for creating program practices and policies that support staff, children, and families to make healthy choices and develop life-long healthy habits. Module topics include healthy eating, family-style dining, breastfeeding support, active play, reducing screen time, and staff wellness.

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