

CORE SKILL: MOVE

Healthy Habits



What You Need to Know

Toddlers are notoriously selective eaters, but it's a natural part of development and most likely not cause for concern (even "picky eaters" are often getting the nutrition they need). When you support a toddler's choice to eat a healthy food, not only do you nourish their body in the moment, but you're also making it more likely that they will reach for healthy food in the future. The best way to promote healthy eating habits is to offer nutritious foods multiple times and to allow children to decide *whether* to eat, *what* to eat, and *how much* to eat.

Things to Consider

Involve families in promoting healthy food choices while respecting their varying rules about eating, preferences, habits, or situations. For example, you can invite parents to join the class for meals or cooking activities, share a family favorite dish, participate in gardening, or share information about the Intentional Teaching Practices you are implementing at school. Be mindful in respecting differences even when they don't align with the habits you are promoting at school. For example, it's important to **not** make children (or families) feel bad about foods they eat (e.g., "Oh, your mom sent you a cookie for your snack? That's not a healthy food."). Eating habits can be sensitive and deeply personal, so approach this Core Skill focus with respect for families.

There are lots of steps involved in eating: tolerance, interaction, smell, touch, taste, *then* eat/swallow. Children who are "picky eaters" or who have feeding disorders (sensory- or behavior-related) may need more practice at one or more of these steps before they are willing to eat certain foods. Children are also much more likely to engage in these steps when they are presented through play/positive experiences.

Development of Interest in Healthy Habits

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Show interest in new foods that are offered.	Be willing to try new, nutritious foods (when offered multiple times).
	Sometimes make healthy, nutritious choices when presented with several options (with adult support).
	Express preference for certain foods (sometimes based on whether it's nutritious).
	Communicate to adult when feeling hungry, thirsty, or full.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of healthy habits:

- ◆ Gardening and cooking activities where children participate in growing and preparing healthy food.
- ◆ Books about healthy food, where food comes from, or trying new things.
- ◆ Pretend play (e.g., pretending to serve, cook, grow healthy foods).
- ◆ Present and gently encourage children to interact with a variety of foods and textures (e.g., puree such as apple sauce, hard munchable such as carrots or veggie straws, soft "chewables" such as pasta) when possible.
- ◆ Family-style meals: Eating family-style means serving food in dishes and eating *together* at the table. Children help set-up the tables and serve themselves (with adult help if needed), rather than receiving plates with pre-distributed portions. Eating family-style promotes healthy discussions about food, provides opportunities for adults to model healthy eating habits, and encourages children to try new foods (they are more likely to try if they see others eating it!). Family-style meals can be messy and require patience, but they are well worth it!



Intentional Teaching Practices to Promote Healthy Habits

OBSERVE	OBSERVE Take time to observe children’s preferences and feelings towards food. Do they take a nibble first or reject outright? What kind of food do they pretend to cook? Do they make the connection that food comes from a garden or farm? How do children react to what you are eating?
FOCUS	Model and Narrate Healthy Food Choices Identify/label food by name: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ “I’m eating a yummy vegetable. It’s called a carrot.”◆ “We are growing lettuce in our garden! That’s a healthy food with leaves that we can eat in salads or sandwiches.” Purpose of eating food: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ “I am feeling tired. I’m going to eat this food to give my body the energy to think and play!”◆ “I’m eating ‘grow’ foods so that I can stay big and strong.” Trying new foods: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ “Hmm, I’ve never had a green bean. But I know it’s healthy for me so I’m going to take a little bite to try it... Oh! I like it! I tried a new food and I like it!” or, “Well, it’s not my favorite, but I’m proud I tried it.” Children making healthy choices. Focus on narrating the positive behaviors you observe, rather than coercing or shaming a child. For example, saying, “Wow! I see (Child) trying oatmeal for the first time! Good job for trying!” is more effective (for that child and the others watching) than saying, “You’ll never get big and strong if you don’t try new foods like oatmeal. Come on, just one little bite?”
SCAFFOLD I	Present All Foods as Attractive, Enjoyable Options Celebrate the deliciousness and benefits of all foods. Avoid making deals (e.g., “If you eat the salad, you can have more bread (or a treat).”) as this often leads to power struggles and it sends the message that some foods must be suffered through in order to get other foods (which makes them less attractive).
SCAFFOLD II	Promote Child Autonomy Let children decide <i>what and how much</i> to eat. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Children are more likely to eat healthy foods when presented multiple options. It’s typical (and okay!) for toddlers to be selective eaters. You may need to offer a food 10-15 times before a child will try it. Avoid coercing children as that often leads to power struggles/them eating LESS!◆ Children are coming to the table with varying appetites, heights/weights, metabolisms, preferences, and experiences (e.g., maybe some ate a huge breakfast, while another didn’t) so while some may stick to small nibbles, others may be asking for seconds or thirds, and that’s okay! Meals are not one-size fits all! Empower and trust children to listen to their own bodies to know when they are hungry or full.
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines. Make plans for incorporating family-style meals into your regular routine.