

# CORE SKILL: MOVE

## Healthy Habits



### What You Need to Know

When preschoolers eat healthy, nutritious foods, it not *only* supports their physical growth/needs, but also their energy, motivation, mood, and ability to focus and learn. When they form positive thoughts and habits around healthy eating, it makes it more likely that they will reach for healthy foods in the future. You can support this development by involving children in growing, cooking, identifying, and discussing healthy foods, as well as the people who work with our food (i.e., farmers, pickers, factory workers, grocery store workers, chefs) in fun, positive ways. It's also key that you offer nutritious foods multiple times and 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 values about eating, preferences, habits, or situations. For example, you can invite families to join 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 in your classroom or program. 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 36 and 48 months, children may:	Between 48 and 60 months, children may:
Demonstrate a basic knowledge of the role of foods and nutrition in healthy development.	Demonstrate an increasing understanding of the ways in which foods and nutrition help the body grow and be healthy.
Often require adult guidance and supervision to make healthy eating choices.	Make healthy eating choices both independently and with support.
	Identify a variety of healthy and unhealthy foods.
	Moderate food consumption based on awareness of own hunger and fullness.

### 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.
- ◆ Visits to farms, grocery stores, or markets to build an understanding of sources of food.
- ◆ Books about healthy foods, 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 open 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!) It supports the tolerance, interaction, and smell steps to eating. Family-style meals can be messy and require patience, but they are well worth it!



## Intentional Teaching Practices for Promoting Healthy Habits

OBSERVE	<p><b>OBSERVE</b></p> <p>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? How do children approach new food? How long do they take to finish a meal? Do children need reminders to chew/swallow? Do you hear children gag, cough, or have changes in voice after eating? If there are concerns for children’s safety during meals, contact parents/caregivers, school nurse, etc.</p>
FOCUS	<p><b>Model and Narrate Healthy Food Choices</b></p> <p><b>Identify/label food by name:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ “Let’s look through this newspaper and find the healthy foods. Oh! I see cabbage. Cabbage is full of vitamins that help our body stay healthy and strong.”</li> <li>◆ “We are growing radishes in our garden! That’s a healthy, ‘grow’ food!”</li> </ul> <p><b>Purpose of eating food/drink:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ “I am feeling tired. I’m going to eat this food to give my body the energy to think and play!”</li> <li>◆ “You’ve been running so fast. Now you are stopping for a drink of water to replenish your body. You’re taking good care of your body and now you’re ready to run again!”</li> </ul> <p><b>Trying new foods:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ “I’ve never had a green bean. I know it’s healthy for me so I’m going to take a little bite to try it... Oh! I tried a new food and I like it!” or, “Well, it’s not my favorite, but I’m proud I tried it.”</li> <li>◆ “I really like these crunchy veggie sticks, but this cheese stick is long and white too. They look similar, so I’d like to try it.”</li> <li>◆ “It’s important to ‘eat the colors of the rainbow.’ You’re eating orange, green, and brown.”</li> </ul>
SCAFFOLD I	<p><b>Present All Foods as Attractive, Enjoyable Options</b></p> <p>Celebrate the deliciousness and benefits of all foods. Avoid making deals (e.g., “If you eat the salad, you can have 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). Show positive attention to children who interact with foods, even if they don’t eat it. For example, if a child typically avoids apple sauce, but they dipped their spoon into it, praise them for this big step!</p>
SCAFFOLD II	<p><b>Promote Child Autonomy</b></p> <p>Let children decide <i>what</i> and <i>how much</i> to eat.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Children are more likely to eat healthy foods when presented multiple options. It’s typical (and okay!) for preschoolers to be picky eaters, so 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!</li> <li>◆ 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.</li> </ul>
KEEP IT GOING	<p>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.</p>