Healthy Eating and Active Living for Your One to Five Year Old

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Healthy Eating and Active Living for Your One to Five Year Old

As a parent or caregiver, you influence a child from the moment they’re born...

Young children learn by watching. They watch what you do. They watch family and friends. Then they imitate what they see, and the habits they learn in the early years can form a pattern that lasts a lifetime. The eating habits children learn in those first years have a lasting effect on how they grow and develop. When you guide your preschooler about how and what to eat, you help them learn to make healthy choices. Making healthy choices about food and physical activity helps children feel good about themselves. Most importantly, these healthy choices help them grow the way nature meant them to grow.

Usually, children from one to three years old are called ‘toddlers’. From three until they turn six they’re often called ‘preschoolers’. To keep things simple, in this booklet ‘preschooler’ is used to mean children one through five years old. ‘Parent’ is used to mean parents, caregivers or anyone else involved in the care of a child.
Encourage Healthy Eating Habits

Enjoy mealtimes!

We eat because our bodies need food, and we eat meals together so we can spend time together. Mealtimes are also a time for children to learn new skills.

Parents and children have different jobs when it comes to food and eating.

• Your role as a parent is to decide what, when, and where to offer food.
• Your child’s role is to decide whether or not to eat, and how much to eat.

You have a job to do. Allowing your child to do theirs will help prevent feeding difficulties.

Parents decide WHAT foods to offer

• Parents do the grocery shopping. You are the one who decides what food is brought into the house and put on the table. So it’s important to have healthy eating habits yourself and be a role model for your preschooler.
• Offer your child a variety of healthy foods. You’ll find lots of healthy choices in Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating, which is available at www.hc-sc.gc.ca.
• Think about what your family likes to eat, but don’t limit the menu to just what they’re used to.
• Offer new foods, but just a small amount at first. It may take as many as 10 to 15 tries at different times before your child accepts a new food.

Children like to eat with their fingers. And that’s perfectly okay! So serve food in a form they can handle themselves.
• Even small children can help in some way in making a meal. Get your child involved in helping, and they’ll likely be interested in eating what they helped to make.

Parents decide WHEN to offer food

• Children need regular meals and regular snacks to grow well. That usually means three meals and two to three snacks a day.
• Plan and offer meals and snacks at regular times, then your child will be hungry when it’s time to eat.
• Knowing that meals and snacks come at regular times helps your child feel safe about eating. They won’t wonder when food is coming next, or want to keep eating through the day.
• Offer food and drinks at mealtimes and at snacktimes, but not in between. If your child is thirsty between meals or snacks, offer water.
Parents decide WHERE to offer food

- Children eat best when they sit down for meals and snacks, rather than running around.
- Sit down with your child and eat meals with them.
- Encourage a pleasant atmosphere. It’s easier then for everyone to eat well and enjoy the meal.
- Turn off the TV and radio during mealtimes. This will help your preschooler focus on eating and learning eating skills.

Children decide WHETHER or not to eat

- Children’s appetites change from day to day. Some days children seem to eat a lot. Other days they won’t eat much. This is normal!

Children decide HOW MUCH to eat

- Children know when they are hungry and when they are full. Allow your child to leave the plate unfinished. Never bribe them to eat “just one more bite”.
- Stay positive! Remember that trying to force a child to eat does not work!
- A child’s portion tends to be smaller than an adult’s. Children have small stomachs, so they need to eat small amounts more often.
- Your child’s steady growth is the best way to tell that they are eating enough.
Eating skills and changing behaviours

Your preschooler will gradually become more skilled at chewing and swallowing and at using a spoon and fork. Here are some of the changes in eating skills and behaviours you may expect from your growing child.

From 12 to 18 months
• Eats a variety of nutritious foods
• Likes eating with hands
• Drinks from a cup
• Is awkward with spoon and fork
• Wants foods others are eating
• Tries different behaviours to see how you will react

18 months to two years
• Not as hungry
• Likes eating with hands
• Likes similar patterns and routine
• Likes trying foods with different textures
• Shows food likes and dislikes
• Is easily distracted
• Uses fork and spoon with more skill
• Has very clear ideas about eating or not eating

Two years old
• Definite likes and dislikes
• Can be very demanding
• Feelings of hunger decrease as growth slows down
• Dawdles over food at times
• Insists on doing things by themselves
• Likes to help in kitchen
• Holds glass or cup with one hand
• Better at chewing, but may still choke on certain foods
• Routines become more important

Three years old
• Improved appetite and interest in food
• Asks for favourite foods
• Likes shapes, colours, ABCs
• May demand only one regular food for a few days (food jags)
• Eats well with spoon and fork
• Chews most food
• Can pour liquids from a small jug
• May prefer raw vegetables to cooked
• Influenced by TV commercials, family, and friends

Four years old
• Is able to eat hard foods like popcorn and nuts
• Influenced by what friends are eating
• Uses fork and spoon easily
• Would rather talk than eat
• May continue to insist on only one regular food for a few days

Five years old
• Can feed themselves
• Prefers simple foods
• May be a fussy eater
• Friends will really start to influence food choices
Tips for choosing meals and snacks

Plan meals and snacks according to Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating. The following charts show the foods to offer every day, those to serve sometimes, and those to serve least often.

- “Serve most often” foods are healthy choices from the four food groups to serve every day.
- “Serve sometimes” foods are also healthy choices. But they may be lower in fibre, vitamins, and minerals and higher in sugar, salt, or fat.
- “Foods to serve least often” are foods that have a lot of sugar, salt, or fat and very little fibre, vitamins, or minerals. Use these foods occasionally, but not instead of choices from healthy food groups.

These charts are general guidelines. Use these along with your own best judgment. There’s lots of information on food labels. You’ll find reading labels will help you choose between similar kinds of foods.

To learn more about what’s on food labels, visit the Healthy Eating is in Store for You web site at www.healthyeatingisinstore.ca.
## Serving sizes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5-12 servings per day</th>
<th>Serve most often (use daily)</th>
<th>Serve sometimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A preschooler serving is:</td>
<td>Whole grain breads/toast/buns</td>
<td>Fruit crisps/cobblers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1/2-1 slice bread</td>
<td>Whole wheat bagels/pita bread</td>
<td>Plain cookies (made with oatmeal, peanut butter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 75-175 mL (1/3-3/4 cup)</td>
<td>English muffins</td>
<td>White bread/crackers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hot or cold cereal</td>
<td>• Whole wheat pancakes/waffles</td>
<td>Biscuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 50-125 mL (1/4-1/2 cup)</td>
<td>• Whole grain pastas/rice/crackers</td>
<td>Roti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pasta or rice</td>
<td>• Tortillas, rice cakes</td>
<td>Low fat granola/plain granola bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1/4-1/2 bagel, pita, or bun</td>
<td>• Unsweetened hot or cold cereals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Vegetables and Fruit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5-10 servings per day</th>
<th>Cut fresh fruit and vegetables into small pieces your preschooler can feed themselves. Try to choose fruits and vegetables that are more colourful (green, red, or orange). Limit juice to 125-250 mL (1/2-1 cup) unsweetened fruit/vegetable juice per day.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A preschooler serving is:</td>
<td>Raw vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1/2-1 medium size vegetable or fruit</td>
<td>Cooked fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 50-125 mL (1/4-1/2 cup) fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables or fruit</td>
<td>Fresh fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 125-250 mL (1/2-1 cup) salad</td>
<td>Canned fruit or fruit cups in water or juice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 50-125 mL (1/4-1/2 cup) juice</td>
<td>Unsweetened fruit sauces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dried fruit or real fruit leathers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Milk Products

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2-4 servings per day</th>
<th>White milk (homo or 2%)</th>
<th>Homemad milk pudding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A preschooler serving is:</td>
<td>Yogourt</td>
<td>Flavoured milks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1/2-1 cup milk</td>
<td>Cottage cheese</td>
<td>Custards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 25-50 g (1-2 oz) cheese</td>
<td>Hard cheese</td>
<td>Ice Cream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 75-175 g (1/3-3/4 cup) yogurt</td>
<td>Soy beverages fortified with calcium and vitamin D may be used for children over age two.</td>
<td>Processed cheese slices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Breastmilk is also a source of milk products.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Whole milk should be used until age two.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Preschoolers should have at least 2 cups (500 mL) of milk every day.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Speak to a registered nutritionist or dietitian or nurse at your local health centre for more information.

2 Avoid offering snacks of sticky, sweet foods such as dried fruit and candy. These can stick to the teeth and cause cavities (unless children brush their teeth right after).

3 Although the nutrient content is similar to white milk, white milk is a better choice because it is lower in sugar.

4 Be aware of foods that can cause choking. Cut wieners and sausages into long strips, and then into bite-size pieces. Raw fruit: Remove pits, seeds, and peels and cut the fruit into bite-size pieces. Cut grapes in half. Cut raw vegetables into narrow strips, or grate the vegetables. Spread peanut butter thinly; never serve it right off a spoon.
### Serving sizes

**Meat and Alternatives**

- Beef, chicken, turkey or pork
- Fresh or canned fish
- Eggs
- Peanut/nut butters
- Tofu
- Legumes (dried peas, beans, lentils)

### Foods to serve least often

- Potato chips, cheese puffs
- French fries
- Instant packaged noodle soups
- Chocolate, candies, marshmallows
- Pop, fruit-flavoured drinks, iced tea, slush drinks, sports drinks
- Flavoured milk/milkshakes
- Ready-to-serve pudding cups
- Fruit leather with sugar added (fruit roll-ups or fruit-flavoured gummy snacks)
- Cakes, cookies, and granola bars with icing or chocolate coating
- Flavoured jelly powder, sherbet
- Sugar coated/pre-sweetened cereals
- Fruit pie fillings
- Cereal cream, whipping cream
- Wieners, sausages, high-fat deli meats, such as salami, bologna
- Deep fried or battered meat, poultry or fish
- Cheese spreads

### What else you should keep in mind

- Use margarine, butter, salad dressing, and sour cream in moderation.
- Limit salty foods. Use high-salt seasonings and condiments in moderation, and only after you’ve tasted the food to see if extra seasoning is necessary.
- Balance higher fat foods with lower fat foods. For example, avoid having higher fat choices such as pepperoni pizza, hot dogs, and chicken nuggets all in the same week. When you serve higher fat choices, balance them with more vegetables and fruit.

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**Talk to your health care professional if you have concerns or questions about food allergies.**

**Caution! These foods can cause choking in children under three to four years of age:**

- Popcorn, nuts, and seeds
- Fish with bones
- Snacks using skewers or toothpicks
- Solid foods that are hard, small, and round, and smooth or sticky such as candies and cough drops
Juice: Too much of a good thing?

Fruit juice tastes sweet, and most children love to drink it. Yet, too much can be harmful.

- A child who drinks too many sweet beverages such as fruit juice, fruity drinks, and pop, is filling up on sugar. Then they may not have enough room for healthy meals and snacks.
- Sipping sweet beverages all day can lead to tooth decay.
- Offer milk or juice in a cup, and only at planned meals or snacks.
- Offer water anytime throughout the day.

Remember to limit unsweetened fruit or vegetable juice to a maximum of 1/2 to 1 cup (125 to 250 mL) per day.

Choose fruit juice NOT fruit drink.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Juice</th>
<th>Drink</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look for these words on the packet:</td>
<td>Look for these words on the packet:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “unsweetened”</td>
<td>• “drink”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “pure fruit juice from concentrate”</td>
<td>• “punch”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “no artificial flavors or colors added”</td>
<td>• “-ade”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “100% juice”</td>
<td>• “beverage”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “cocktail”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>These have little or no fruit juice and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>are mainly sugar-flavoured water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real juice has more than 20 vitamins and</td>
<td>Many fruit drinks are made to look like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minerals</td>
<td>juice. But they are mostly sugar, water,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and a little fruit juice. And they have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>very few, if any, vitamins and minerals.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Eating Well Together Meal Planner

This meal planner gives a sample of a week of meals and snacks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEAL</th>
<th>MONDAY</th>
<th>TUESDAY</th>
<th>WEDNESDAY</th>
<th>THURSDAY</th>
<th>FRIDAY</th>
<th>SATURDAY</th>
<th>SUNDAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>French toast made with whole wheat bread</td>
<td>Oatmeal Orange sections Milk</td>
<td>Cold whole grain cereal Apple or grape juice Milk</td>
<td>Bagel with peanut butter or light cream cheese Orange or apple juice Milk</td>
<td>Cold whole grain cereal Fresh or dried fruit Milk</td>
<td>Pancakes Fresh or frozen berries Syrup Milk</td>
<td>Scrambled or poached eggs Whole wheat toast &amp; jam Apple juice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREAKFAST</td>
<td>Canned peaches Milk</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bagel half with light cream cheese Grape juice</td>
<td>Banana Berry Wake Up Shake Pumpkin Raisin Muffins</td>
<td>Graham crackers Applesauce Water</td>
<td>Sunny Orange Shake Whole wheat crackers</td>
<td>Dry cereal mix Orange juice</td>
<td>Orange slices or banana Milk</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNACK</td>
<td>Apple Cheese Whole wheat crackers Water</td>
<td>Tuna or egg salad sandwich Raw vegetables with Caesar or Ranch dressing dip Milk</td>
<td>Carrot or vegetable soup Hummus or peanut butter on pita bread triangles Pudding Milk</td>
<td>Macaroni and cheese Raw or steamed carrots &amp; broccoli Oatmeal raisin cookie Milk</td>
<td>Chili (vegetarian or meat) Cornmeal muffins or whole wheat toast Frozen Yogourt Milk</td>
<td>Ham and cheese or peanut butter sandwich Fresh or canned fruit Milk</td>
<td>Ground beef or bean burritos stuffed with corn, lettuce, cheese &amp; salsa Apple oatmeal cookies Milk</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUNCH</td>
<td>Chicken or turkey with shredded lettuce &amp; carrots in a pita or tortilla wrap Melon slices Milk</td>
<td>Whole wheat crackers Kiwi halves Water</td>
<td>Banana yogourt Water</td>
<td>Bran, pumpkin or oatmeal muffin Apple or grape juice</td>
<td>Raw vegetables &amp; breadsticks Caesar or Ranch dressing dip</td>
<td>Banana bread Milk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNACK</td>
<td>Big-Batch Bran Muffins Apple or orange juice</td>
<td>Graham crackers Fresh or canned peaches or pears</td>
<td>Whole wheat crackers Oatmeal cookie Milk</td>
<td>Banana yogourt Water</td>
<td>Bran, pumpkin or oatmeal muffin Apple or grape juice</td>
<td>Raw vegetables &amp; breadsticks Caesar or Ranch dressing dip</td>
<td>Banana bread Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPPER</td>
<td>Broiled ham steak Scalloped potatoes Frozen corn Fresh or canned fruit Oatmeal cookie Milk</td>
<td>Hot ‘n’ Spicy Turkey Burgers with Sweet Potato “Fries”</td>
<td>Veggie Beef and Pasta Bake Mixed dark green lettuce salad Whole grain bread or rolls Milk</td>
<td>BBQ chicken Fresh, canned or frozen corn Whole wheat bread Milk</td>
<td>Polynesian Pork Kebabs Couscous or rice Apple Crisp Milk</td>
<td>Quick Steamed Fish Fillets with Potatoes &amp; Asparagus Banana bread Milk</td>
<td>Baked chicken with pasta &amp; prepared tomato sauce Steamed green beans Ice cream Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

You can use the meal planner as a guide to planning your own weekly menu. (You’ll find a blank meal planner page at www.dietitians.ca/healthystart). You’ll want to adapt the plan to your family’s personal and cultural food preferences. To keep preschoolers satisfied, your daily plan should include three meals and two to three snacks. Snacks should include foods that might be missed at meals – vegetables and fruit, for example. Remember to allow two to three hours between the end of one meal or snack and the start of the next one.

You’ll want to be sure to:
- Choose a variety of foods from each of the four food groups every day.
- Include foods from at least three food groups in each meal.
- Include foods from at least two food groups in each snack.
- Remember to prepare foods safely. See the section on Food safety and your preschooler.

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### Common childhood feeding issues & solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If your child wants the same food every day</td>
<td>Let your child have their &quot;favourite food&quot; as long as it is nutritious. Continue to offer other healthy choices at each meal. If a big fuss is NOT made your child will soon move on to another favourite food. Be aware that if preschoolers eat only a limited number of foods their intake of important nutrients will be limited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your child takes too long to eat</td>
<td>Be patient and give your child time to explore, touch and taste their food. Young children need time to experience food, to eat and to learn how to use utensils. After a reasonable amount of time (20-30 minutes) remove your child's plate without a fuss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your child refuses to eat</td>
<td>Respect your child's awareness of their own body. A child's appetite can vary from day to day and from meal to meal so they may not be hungry. Serve smaller amounts of food. Make sure snacks are served well before meal times (e.g. one to two hours). Avoid becoming a short order cook – children should get used to sharing the family meal. A skipped meal every once in a while is not a concern as long as your child is growing normally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your child refuses to try new foods</td>
<td>Continue to offer &quot;new&quot; foods and put small amounts on your child's plate whenever you eat them. Some children need to see a &quot;new&quot; food many times before they will try and accept it. Encourage your child to try a small bite. Avoid forcing your child to eat a &quot;new&quot; food as this can reduce acceptance. Introduce &quot;new&quot; foods to your child when other children are eating and enjoying that food. Let your child explore and help prepare the &quot;new&quot; food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your child does not eat vegetables</td>
<td>Serve vegetables at snack time when your child is hungry. Offer a variety of brightly coloured vegetables so the child can choose what they like. Serve vegetables raw or lightly cooked (overcooking can make vegetables taste bitter). Be cautious serving raw vegetables to toddlers under three years old as they are at greater risk of choking. Purée or finely chop vegetables and put them in pasta sauce or soup. Involve preschoolers in choosing vegetables at the grocery store or market - or let them try growing their own garden.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### If your child does not drink milk

Offer small servings (125 mL or 1/2 cup) but don't force it. Preschoolers should have at least 500 mL (2 cups) of fluid milk each day to get enough vitamin D. Yogourt and cheese provide calcium but not vitamin D. Serve milk at a temperature your child likes. Use milk instead of water in cream soups, with pureed vegetables, in puddings and hot cereal. Talk to your family doctor or a registered dietitian before deciding if your child needs a supplement.

### If your child drinks too much milk

Milk can be filling and may leave less room for other healthy foods. Determine how much milk your child drinks and limit intakes if your child is drinking too much. Aim for 2-3 cups (500-750 mL) per day. Do not give milk in a bottle. Milk should be served in a cup at set times such as at meal times.

### If your child refuses to eat meat

Taste and difficulty chewing can turn some children away from meat. Make meat more appealing by cutting it into small bits and serving it in soups, stews, tomato sauce or meatloaf. Offer other protein foods such as eggs, fish, cheese, smooth peanut butter, soy foods, cooked dried beans or lentils. Increase iron intake by serving iron-fortified breads and cereals, dark leafy vegetables, eggs, cooked dried beans and lentils, and dried fruit such as raisins. Talk to a registered dietitian or your family doctor if your child does not eat any meat or dairy products. Your child may not be getting enough vitamin B 12.

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Vitamin and mineral supplements

Vitamin and mineral supplements and other food supplements aren’t needed if your child eats a variety of foods from each food group from Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating. Supplements don’t take the place of food. They can’t replace healthy eating.

Tips under “Common Childhood Feeding Issues and Solutions” help you make sure your child gets the nutrition they need from food. Sometimes, though, there are situations where a child may need a supplement. For example, if a child:

- Hardly ever eats foods containing iron. These are foods such as meats, iron-fortified breads and cereals, eggs, dried fruits, cooked dried beans or lentils, and dark leafy vegetables
- follows a strict vegetarian diet, or rarely eats meat or milk products
- usually drinks less than two cups (500 mL) of milk each day
- consistently refuses to eat an entire food group

Your family doctor or a registered nutritionist or dietitian can help you decide if your child needs a supplement. Like any other pill, supplements can be dangerous if too much is taken. Be sure to keep them out of reach of children.
Food safety and your preschooler

As your child gets older they may start eating a greater variety of foods. And they'll also start trying to help around the kitchen. Here are a few reminders to help you keep you and your preschooler ‘food safe’ and healthy.

• Wash your hands to show your preschooler how to wash hands thoroughly.
  – Teach your child to wash their hands with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds before handling food. Or after using the bathroom, or changing diapers, or touching animals. Teach them to sing a song while washing their hands. (Something like “Twinkle, twinkle, little star” is just about the right length.) When the song is done, their hands should be clean.
• Take food off the table and refrigerate it as soon as possible after the meal is over.
• Wash kitchen and table surfaces every day.
• Use a clean cloth to wash your child’s hands and face.
• Wash fruits and vegetables before eating them.
• Some foods are a high risk because they can contain bacteria that can make your child very sick. Don’t serve the following foods to children:
  – Raw sprouts such as alfalfa and bean sprouts. Cooked sprouts are safe.
  – Unpasteurized fruit juice, milk, cheese (especially soft cheese or blue-veined cheese).
  – Raw eggs.
  – Uncooked dough or batter that contains raw eggs.

You will find more information on food safety at: www.canfightbac.org.

What about fish and mercury?

• Fish is an excellent source of protein and fats. However, certain fish may be high in mercury. Children are particularly sensitive to mercury. It may be harmful to their developing brains.
• Fish low in mercury include canned “light” tuna and fresh and canned salmon.
• Canned “white” (albacore) tuna is generally higher in mercury than canned “light” tuna. Use “light” tuna for children.
• Young children should avoid eating fresh or frozen predatory fish (tuna, shark, swordfish). These fish have higher levels of mercury. If you have questions about fish, contact your local public health centre for more information.
Encourage your preschooler to be active

It’s healthy to be physically active throughout your life. People sometimes think young children are naturally active. But that’s not so. Television, video games, and busy schedules can fill up a child’s day. Then there’s no time for physical activity.

Early childhood is the ideal time for your preschooler to be active. This is when they enjoy learning to run and jump and climb and play ball. This is where you, as a parent, play an important role. By making opportunities for your child to be physically active, you can encourage them to enjoy physical activity.

How much physical activity toddlers and preschoolers need

- Every day, toddlers need at least:
  - 30 minutes* of structured physical activity
  - 60 minutes up to several hours* of unstructured physical activity.

- Every day, preschoolers need at least:
  - 60 minutes* of structured physical activity
  - 60 minutes up to several hours* of unstructured physical activity.

Structured physical activity

- Games and activities you show your child or that you do with them. This helps your preschooler find out what they can do. It helps develop movement skills, and it also helps them learn to get along with others.

Unstructured physical activity

- Supervised time for your child to play actively alone or with other children. This is a physically active time when children decide what to do and how to do it. They might play inside or outside. Or on play structures. Or building forts. Or running and jumping. Equipment needs to be suitable for your child’s interests and physical ability.

Physical activity is movement that works the body’s muscles and uses energy. Active living is a way of life that values and includes physical activity every day.

* According to physical activity guidelines for children released by the National Association for Sport and Physical Activity.
How you can encourage your child to be physically active

1) Make it fun! Physical activity should be fun. And it should be part of a child’s daily life. Of course, children don’t find physical activity fun when they “have” to do it. So encouraging active play is one way you can help your preschooler be physically active.

2) Build on movement skills. Running, jumping, twisting, kicking, throwing, and catching are basic movement skills. Your child learns and develops them by practicing. These skills are the basis of movements that are more complex. And they’re the foundation for lifelong physical activity. Begin each activity by asking your child to do something you know they can do well.

3) Plan a variety of activities. Plan activities that fit your child’s abilities and interests. You’ll also want to suit them to the time of year and the resources available to you. Think of different activities that focus on:
   - endurance (running, jumping, swimming strengthen the heart and lungs)
   - flexibility (gymnastics and dancing encourage bending, stretching, reaching)
   - strength (climbing builds strong muscles and bones)

Make it more important to participate and develop skills than to win or get results.

4) Praise their efforts. Praise and encouragement help your child feel good about themselves and about being active. Focus your comments on what they’re doing well. Avoid being critical or negative.

5) Play along. Take part in your preschooler’s activities – at their eye level, when possible. A child’s self-esteem and skills improve when adults take part in their play.

6) Increase your preschooler’s active time. A simple way to encourage activity is to limit your child’s TV viewing to just one hour a day.*

7) Take breaks. A child who is being physically active or physical needs to take breaks for a drink of water and to cool down. So it’s natural for your preschooler to want to take breaks between short bursts of activity.

* A recommendation of the Canadian Paediatric Society.
8) **Promote all types of physical activities for both boys and girls.** Encourage all types of activities, whether your preschooler is a girl or a boy. Avoid comments about what little boys and little girls should or should not do. Introduce your child to women and men who are physically active. As a parent, you can be a role model yourself and show it’s fun and enjoyable to be physically active.

9) **Stay active in winter.** Your child needs to be physically active every day, no matter what the weather. Dress for the weather. Or play indoors. Winter is a great time for your preschooler to explore new activities and games outside. Build snow sculptures or snow animals. Make snow angels, or patterns walking in fresh snow.

10) **Keep it simple.** Walking, playing, jumping, and climbing don’t cost anything and are fun to do. Remember, your preschooler may be naturally better at one activity than others. Dress your child to be active: in shoes they can run in and clothes they can get dirty in. Provide a safe environment to encourage physical activity. Photograph your child being active and display the pictures. Plan outings that offer physical activity. Visit playgrounds, trails, parks. Go to community events that have physical activities for children.

*Source: Adapted and reprinted with permission from Creating the Circle of Healthy Child Care, Calgary Health Region, September 2004.*
Use this sample activity planner as a guide for planning activities you can do with your preschooler. Adapt it to suit your schedule and activity preferences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MONDAY</th>
<th>TUESDAY</th>
<th>WEDNESDAY</th>
<th>THURSDAY</th>
<th>FRIDAY</th>
<th>SATURDAY</th>
<th>SUNDAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Tiny Tot Gym Class</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Rhythmical activities</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Parent &amp; Tot Swim Class</td>
<td>Family outing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td>• stretching and moving exercises</td>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>• walking or hiking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• building blanket forts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Tiny Tot Gym Class</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Parachute or blanket games</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Parent &amp; Tot Swim Class</td>
<td>Family outing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td></td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>• cycling or cross country skiing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• stretching and moving exercises</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Tiny Tot Gym Class</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Obstacle &amp; climbing course</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Parent &amp; Tot Swim Class</td>
<td>Family outing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td></td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>• picnic in the park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• outdoor hopping and skipping games</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Tiny Tot Gym Class</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Ball games</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Parent &amp; Tot Swim Class</td>
<td>Family outing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td></td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td>• skating or scavenger hunt</td>
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<tr>
<td>• freeze tag</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>Tiny Tot Gym Class</td>
<td>Walk</td>
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<td>Walk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Indoor free play</td>
<td>Outdoor free play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• dancing making up your own dance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• outdoor hopping and skipping games</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hay</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bold type (black)** = “Structured Activities” such as games and activities that you direct or do with your preschooler to keep them moving such as walking, exercising, bike riding, skating, gymnastics, dancing, active games, etc. These can also include activities that you might take your preschooler to.

**Regular type (blue)** = “Unstructured Activities” including supervised free time for children to play actively on their own or with other children. For example playing inside or outside on play structures, building forts, running and jumping, etc.

**Italic type (green)** = Other activities that can be done by preschoolers with their parents or child care providers.

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Physical activities your preschooler can do

The kind of things a child can do depends on their age and stage of development. There is a basic pattern to the way children develop. But within that pattern, children grow and develop at very different rates. The physical skills and abilities of each child are just as different. So an activity that one child likes will not appeal to another. It’s important to plan activities for your preschooler that fit their abilities and their interests.

Activity planning is a way to help you fit activity into your busy day.

• It helps you plan regular opportunities for active play.
• It helps you make sure your preschooler is active every day.
• It helps cut down on inactive time. That’s the time spent on things like television watching and computer games.

Movement Abilities and Activities for Preschoolers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children age 2 to 3 are just beginning or are able to:</th>
<th>Activities suitable for children age 2 to 3 include:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Walk forward and backward, run and jump, and climb up and down stairs</td>
<td>• Stop and go, walking and running games; tag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Walk along a balance beam or board with or without help</td>
<td>• Balance beam (not more than 25 cm off ground)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Throw a ball or bean bag using two hands</td>
<td>• Follow the leader obstacle course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Kick a large ball without losing balance, or runs after it and stops it with two hands before kicking again</td>
<td>• Ball play; throw and retrieve, ball kicking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hit a suspended ball with a large bat</td>
<td>• Hitting and batting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Crawl and climb up and through play structures and household furniture</td>
<td>• Ice skating with assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sit with balance on a swing, while being gently pushed from behind by an adult</td>
<td>• Water play and swimming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sit on and skillfully move a riding toy, pushing with two feet</td>
<td>• Rhythm, music and dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Marching band, rhythmical activities, hopping and singing games</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Children age 3 to 4 are just beginning or are able to:**

- Walk forward and backward with varying speed and in different directions
- Walk balanced on tip toes
- Jump with increased skill over objects and in combination with walking or running
- Catch a large ball
- Kick a ball with more accuracy and retrieve it with two hands while the ball is in motion
- Hit a ball off batting tee with large bat
- Climb with coordination, balance and a firm grip on large play structure
- Pedal and maneuver a tricycle, big wheels, or small two-wheeled bicycle with or without training wheels
- Swim moving arms and kicking feet, while firmly supported under hips and chest by adult

**Activities suitable for children age 3 to 4 include:**

- Walking and running games; tag
- Jumping over a line
- Balance beam – not more than 50 cm or waist height off the ground (hold hand or stand – beside child for safety)
- Throwing and catching
- Hitting and batting
- Kicking to a partner and retrieving
- Ice skating
- Play structure or obstacle course with ladders, tunnels, ropes, balance board
- Swimming, parents and tot swimming classes
- Rhythm, music and dance
- Blanket and parachute games

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**Children age 5 to 6 are just beginning or are able to:**

- Walk, run, and jump well
- Climb big play structures to their own comfort level
- Catch and throw large and small objects with improved accuracy
- Develop hand-eye coordination
- Develop spatial awareness – how the child judges movement in relations of objects and people
- Develop the concept of teamwork but game skills are not developed
- Respond readily to rhythm and music
- Desire vigorous activity but this may lead to carelessness, especially with others
- Tire easily but recover quickly

**Activities suitable for children age 5 to 6 include:**

- Running and skipping
- Gymnastics and martial arts
- Ropes, bars and climbers
- Games with objects of various sizes, shapes and textures such as balls, beanbags, scoops, and bats
- Games with a minimum number of rules and instructions
- Small groups games emphasizing cooperation rather than competition
- Ice skating
- Swimming
- Cross country skiing
- Rhythm movement including walking, marching, clapping and running
- Strenuous activities with rest and water breaks

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*Adapted from “Moving and Growing – Exercises and activities for twos, threes and fours” and “Moving and Growing – Exercises and Activities for fives and sixes”. Government of Canada Fitness and Amateur Sport, Canadian Institute of Child Health 2000*
Build a positive body image

Body image is what you think you look like and how you feel about that. Having a positive body image makes you feel good about yourself. It gives you a feeling of general well being. And it gives you positive self-esteem.

It is important to encourage your child to have a positive body image.

Sad to say, many people have a negative body image. Sometimes they have false ideas about their body size. No wonder! Messages all around us make us want to have an unrealistic "ideal" body. To encourage a child to have a positive body image, we need to teach them how to look after their body. That means they need to learn to eat healthy foods and live actively. They need to be able to handle stress. And they need to learn to communicate effectively.

Here are some of the things you can do to help your child have a positive body image.

- Help your child understand that people come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Accept your child the way they are, tall or short, large or small. Don’t make critical comments about their body, or the way they look.
- Children come to feel loved and accepted by being loved and accepted by people they look up to. Help your child feel wanted, valued and loved.
- Be aware of the unspoken messages you send. Take care not to criticize your own body. Watch what you say about the way other people look.
- Enjoy your child’s unique personality. And make sure you let them know you do. Focus on their strengths and abilities, not physical appearance.
- Help your child develop their particular skills and interests. Encourage hobbies, friendships, and activities.
- Talk with your child about false and unrealistic images in the media. Point out that TV promises about the “perfect” shape leading to everything good, including love, are misleading and dangerous.
- Help your child develop skills to deal with teasing and bullying. Explain that teasing about appearance is not okay.
- Encourage healthy eating habits in order to be healthy – not just to lose weight.
- Find an activity your whole family enjoys. Then be active together. Show your child you think physical activity is important and that you enjoy it. Being physically active is one of the best ways of developing a positive body image.
Young children are unlikely to have their self-esteem strengthened by flattery. Children can see through it and may even dismiss an adult who heaps praise as a poor source of support, one who is not believable.

As a parent, you influence your child at every age. One of your roles as a parent is to encourage your child to feel good about their body. As a child grows, their size and shape change. Find out what these normal stages are before you start to worry or become critical about your child’s weight. Focus on encouraging your child to feel good about themselves. Help them develop a positive attitude. Positive self-esteem is essential to feeling good about your body.

Is my child growing well?

Your child may be taller, shorter, lighter or heavier than other children of the same age. This is because children come in many different sizes and shapes. Each child has their own pattern of growth that is natural for them.

If you worry your child is growing too slowly or too fast, ask your family doctor or public health nurse about it. Ask them to look at your child’s growth records and take new measurements. The pattern of growth is more important than a single measurement. If there is a change in the pattern, it’s important to find out why. Then you can get the proper help to prevent health problems now and in the future.

If your child is gaining weight too quickly, the goal is to slow down weight gain. But it is important that growth in height continues normally. Follow the healthy eating and activity guides in this pamphlet.*

Do not put a child on a weight loss diet. Severe exercise programs for your child are not advised.

If your child isn’t gaining weight or height as expected, the information in this pamphlet is still suitable.* However, you may also need to offer healthy foods that are higher in energy (calories) more often. This includes things such as peanut butter, full fat cheese, eggs, whole milk.

* Ask to speak to the registered nutritionist or dietitian or nurse at your local community or public health centre. Tell them you have concerns about your child’s eating and growth, and ask them for more information.
Weight and body image

More children than ever before are overweight. An overweight child tends to have a more negative body image than other children. Media messages and comments from peers and others sometimes play a part in this. Overweight children are at higher risk of developing eating disorders.

If your preschooler is a large-size child:
• Help them to accept their body shape. At the same time talk with them about ways of dealing with teasing and bullying.
• Encourage healthy eating habits by offering healthy choices. Be a role model by eating healthily yourself.
• Finally, encourage your child to be active. And do it for fun, not for weight management.

What affects growth?

Genetics: Ethnic background; family and parents’ growth history; parents’ size and shape.
Age: Peak growing periods are in infancy and puberty; slower growth periods in childhood.
General health: Medical conditions; illnesses; medications.
Gender: Boys and girls grow differently at different times.
Eating habits: Types of foods eaten; amounts eaten; how often.
Activity level: Amount of activity; the type; how often.

Everyone benefits from following healthy eating habits. From being physically active. And from focusing on positive body image. These are things the whole family can do. They’re not just for your child!

Remember! Keep the focus on energy and feeling good. Avoid focusing on weight or controlled eating.

Adapted from the following resources:
The ABCs of Feeding Preschoolers, produced by the Sudbury & District Health Unit, adapted and distributed by the Ontario Nutrition Resource Centre and Best Start Resource Centre. www.beststart.org
More information

Books

Raising Happy, Healthy Weight-wise Kids, Judy Toews and Nicole Parton, 2001
Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense, Ellyn Satter, 2000
Your Child’s Weight...Helping Without Harming, Ellyn Satter, 2005
Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family, Ellyn Satter, 1999
Hip Hop Happy! Adventures in Physical Activity for 3 – 5 year olds, Mary Campbell, 2001
500 Five Minute Games – Quick and Easy Activities for 3 – 6 year olds, Jackie Silberg, 1995

Websites

Alberta Health and Wellness: www.healthy.gov.ab.ca
Alberta Centre for Active Living: www.centre4activeliving.ca
Anaphylaxis Canada: www.anaphylaxis.ca
Canadian Health Network: www.canadian-health-network.ca
Canadian Paediatric Society: www.cps.ca
Child and Family Canada: www.cfc-efc.ca
Dietitians of Canada: www.dietitians.ca
Food Allergy Network: www.foodallergy.org
Health Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca
Healthy U: www.healthyalberta.ca
Physical Activity and Active Living: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca
Ready Set Go: www.readysetgo.org

Contacts

Contact your health unit, or public health centre, or Health Link Alberta to find out more about other nutrition-related services such as:

• Handouts on healthy eating; lunch and snack ideas; picky eaters; food budgeting; reading labels; and more.
• Contact information for nutrition-related support groups and agencies in your community.
• Nutrition advice from a registered nutritionist or dietitian

Regional health authority offices are listed in phone books or visit: www.health.gov.ab.ca

Health Link Alberta
Edmonton, call 408-LINK (5465)
Calgary, call 943-LINK (5465)
Outside the Edmonton and Calgary local calling areas, call toll-free 1-866-408-LINK (5465)
www.healthlinkalberta.ca
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• The ABCs of Feeding Preschoolers, produced by the Sudbury & District Health Unit, adapted and distributed by the Ontario Nutrition Resource Centre and Best Start Resource Centre. www.beststart.org

• Healthy Children Come in Different Shapes and Sizes. Written by the Huron County Nutrition Committee, 1992. Adapted and distributed by Nutrition Promotion Program, Peterborough County-City Health Unit 705-743-1000.

• Calgary Health Region
  The Feeding Relationships in Toddlers, Preschoolers and Children (09/03)
  When Weight Gets Ahead of Height in Children, 2003
  When Weight Gets Ahead of Height – Tips for Family and Friends, 2003
  Creating the Circle of Healthy Child Care, September 2004

• Healthy Start for Life. ©2003 Dietitians of Canada.
  www.dietitians.ca/healthystart

• Healthy Eating is in Store for You™, ©2003 Dietitians of Canada and Canadian Diabetes Association. www.healthyeatingisinstore.ca

• Registered dietitians, community nutritionists, public health nurses, pediatricians, public health inspectors, environmental health professionals, community support workers and consumers of Alberta.

• Provincial Community & Public Health Nutritionists: Healthy Eating and Active Living for Your 1 to 5 year old Committee 2004/05.