Nutrition

Lifelong eating habits are shaped during a child’s early years. Teachers of young children have a special opportunity to help children establish a healthy relationship with food and lay the foundation for sound eating habits. Nutrition education and activities help set children on the path to a healthful lifestyle. Providing nutritionally balanced meals and snacks and integrating nutrition education and healthy eating habits in the home and early childhood environment can help prevent health risks such as childhood obesity.

Nutrition education is integrated with the other eight domains. Through food and cooking activities, children also develop skills in math, science, art, language and literacy, social science, health and self-care, and social skills. Nutrition education for preschoolers fosters children’s awareness of different types of foods and promotes exploration and inquiry of food choices. Lifelong habits with foods are developed during early childhood. Through nutrition education in preschool, teachers encourage children to include a wide variety of foods that provide adequate nutrients in their daily diet.

The Nutrition strand consists of the following substrands:

1.0 Nutrition Knowledge
2.0 Nutrition Choices
3.0 Self-Regulation of Eating

Through knowledge, children become aware of different foods and tastes, some of which are familiar and others that are new. As they explore various foods and food preparations, they develop likes and dislikes and begin to make choices based on preference. Both nutrition choices and self-regulation of eating—that is, eating when hungry, chewing food thoroughly, eating slowly, and stopping when full—involves decision-making skills.

Research Highlight

Fear of new foods is common in children.\textsuperscript{45} It may take many tries before a child will taste a new food and up to 20 exposures before a child decides he likes or truly dislikes a food.\textsuperscript{46} Food jags (when a child will eat only one food item meal after meal) are also common. Food jags rarely last long enough to cause harm.\textsuperscript{47} Children’s eating habits are a way for them to feel independent. They reflect typical development in children.\textsuperscript{48}

Some children have disabilities or other issues that affect their decisions about foods. Children with autism often have very limited food preferences; some children may have sensory issues and avoid specific textures or food items. Other children may not like it when different types of foods touch each other on the plate or may wish to eat foods in a particular order. Be aware of differences in children’s preferences and eating habits, and consult with the child’s family and specialist to ensure that needs are met.
1.0 Nutrition Knowledge

Preschool children are active learners who experience the world through their senses, physical involvement, and active play. They are eager to use materials, try new experiences, and communicate their wants, needs, and ideas to others.

Children experience foods, both familiar and unfamiliar, every day through meals, snacks, and cooking activities. As children begin to understand the concepts of food identification and categorizing, teachers may describe how specific foods help our bodies. Children may better understand the overall benefit of food in terms of it helping them grow, giving them energy to run and play, and helping them to become strong. As children begin to understand internal body parts, teachers can initiate discussion of more specific food benefits.

It is essential for children to understand that various foods help the body in different ways and that some children have specific food allergies. For those with allergies, certain foods are potentially harmful for them. Teachers should encourage tasting and eating a variety of foods to obtain adequate nutrients for growth and development. “Variety” may mean foods of different color, shape, texture, and taste.

As children gain understanding of different foods, they can begin to categorize foods in other ways, such as by food groups (e.g., bread, fruits, meat) or the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) MyPlate food guide for young children. MyPlate reflects the 2010 Dietary Guidelines and replaces the MyPyramid for Preschoolers. Every food is all right, but some foods help the body more than others; therefore, people may eat some foods more often than others. Food models, combined with visual aids such as the Food Pyramid and integration of the topic with daily nutrition activities (e.g., mealtime, snack time, cooking activities), can help children begin to understand that some foods are eaten more frequently than others.

Family food choices may be based more on culture, accessibility of foods, and preference rather than on guidelines and recommendations (e.g., Food Pyramid, MyPlate). A family’s food choices should be respected. Families find it helpful to receive information and guidance on making cost-effective food choices, access to community resources (e.g., farmers markets), and ways to obtain lower-cost items (e.g., by purchasing them on sale or in season).
Ms. Harris gathers the children and says, “Let’s do something new for our snack time. Has anyone been on a picnic before?” Leticia looks excited and says, “We went on a picnic with my cousin.” Ms. Harris encourages her to tell the other children what they did. “We sat on a blanket, and there were bugs, and the dog ate my sandwich, and Daddy made hot dogs on a grill.” “That sounds like fun!” exclaimed Ms. Harris. “A picnic is when you take your food and eat outdoors. It could be in a park, under a tree, or in your own backyard. Today, we are going to take our snack and have a picnic outside. I have packed the food and drinks. We will have foods that you can eat with your hands and fingers. We will not need forks or spoons. We need to wash our hands before we go outside. I will also have some wet cloths so you can wipe your hands if they get dirty.”

---

Some young children may not have experienced a picnic, so this will be an exciting new experience for them. Children may eat picnic-style if the class goes on a field trip, so it is helpful to familiarize them with this activity prior to the field trip. During the snack-time picnic, teachers may encourage children to observe the environment, foods, and other aspects of the experience (e.g., what makes it fun, how it is similar and different from their regular snack-time routine). When teachers prepare children for the off-site field trip and picnic, they remind children of this picnic experience. Teachers may suggest to children that they get everything ready for their upcoming event. Each day teachers introduce a different aspect of the event, such as how they will wash hands, what food to take, where they will sit to eat, and other steps or activities that will take place. Teachers may have children help create lists of items needed.

---

**Interactions and Strategies**

**Introduce many different foods.** This can be done through books (e.g., The Fruit Group; “Everybody Cooks Rice”; “Bread, Bread, Bread [Foods of the World];” “The Meat and Beans Group”), meals and snacks, and cooking activities. Include both familiar and new foods, and include food items from the various cultural backgrounds of the children and their families. Encourage children to categorize foods any way they wish, such as by size, shape, color, taste (e.g., sour, sweet) or as “familiar” and “new.” Introduce children to a variety of foods in categories such as breads (e.g., tortilla, bun, roll, sliced white, pita, naan) and fruits (e.g., mango, papaya, avocado, strawberry). Promote learning of English and sign language as foods are introduced using familiar names (e.g., beans/ frijoles; rice/arroz; soup/sopa), adding the sign when you repeat the word in English or Spanish. For more informa-
tion about strategies to support children who are English learners, see chapter 5 of the California Preschool Curriculum Framework, Volume 1.

**Recognize and accommodate differences in eating habits and food choices.** Children may have different eating habits (e.g., liquid or soft foods only, avoidance of food allergies) related to cultural differences, restricted diets, or physical disabilities. To the extent possible, accommodate children’s eating habits that are related to cultural practices. Some children may need special utensils to participate in a family-style meal. Other children may be fed with a feeding tube and take little or no food through the mouth. Food choices may be based not only on personal preferences, but also on cultural or religious preferences (e.g., kosher foods, avoiding certain meat products) and on family values or choices (e.g., vegetarian). Provide explanations for these differences by having a family member or specialist come in and explain why a child eats certain things or has a feeding tube. For resources for working with children with disabilities or other special needs, see the California Preschool Curriculum Framework, Volume 1, appendix D.

**Provide opportunities and encouragement in food exploration.** Encourage children to learn about foods through the five senses: taste, touch, sight, smell, and sound. Children can look at the food to determine its color, size, texture, and shape. They also learn about it by feeling, washing, cutting, measuring, counting, mixing, stirring, and rolling it. Some foods make interesting sounds, such as “snapping” beans or “crunchy” apples. Explore how different foods smell, such as herbs and spices. Follow appropriate food preparation and sanitation practices so that foods can be tasted during snack times.

**Integrate nutrition with other areas of learning through cooking activities.** Introduce new terms and integrate language by creating large recipe cards that children can decorate; incorporate math through ingredient measurements and counting the final product. Explore science when food products change structure through blending and cooking. Children can do activities individually or in small groups. Verbalize and demonstrate each step and encourage children to model your action. As children grow, build on their skills and increase the complexity of the activity and the time allotted for it. Some cooking activities may include steps to be completed throughout the day; baking bread requires mixing dough, waiting for the first rise, punching and shaping dough, waiting for a second rise, and baking.

**Show children where food is produced.** Expand nutrition education through field trips to gardens, farms, orchards or nearby fruit trees, local produce markets, kitchens, restaurants, grocery stores, or other places where food is grown, sold, or prepared. Invite community members to your program as visiting experts (e.g., farmers, food co-op members, community gardeners). Help children experience gardening as they raise herbs, fruits, or vegetables in pots (indoors or outdoors).
or in a small garden plot. Children practice fine motor skills as they shell fresh garden peas, count the number of peas in each pod, and then have the opportunity to taste crisp, sweet vegetables. (As with all food-related activities, it is important to consult with family members about eating habits and potential concerns about foods their children consume.). While learning about numbers, the children observe where peas come from and experience the great taste of raw peas. The pea shelling also provides opportunities for verbal and social skills as children share stories about picking peas or other produce that they have grown, harvested, purchased, or eaten. Introduce gardening or farming songs (e.g., “The Garden Song,” “Oats, Peas, Beans, and Barley”). Incorporate teaching on hygiene and disease prevention by washing hands, washing and peeling produce (if necessary), and demonstrating how to share foods without sharing germs (e.g., using utensils to serve).

Establish special interest areas. Set up special areas to represent nutrition-related environments, such as grocery stores, restaurants, open-air markets, food co-ops, and picnics. Include a variety of items such as coupons, grocery advertisements, restaurant menus, picnic baskets and cloth for seating, durable dishes and utensils, handwashing items, and a “purchasing” system (e.g., cash register, pretend money, coupons).

Integrate nutrition education with basic hygiene education. Teach children to wash hands thoroughly before and after preparing foods. Watch children closely because children may unconsciously touch their nose or tie a shoe and then put their fingers back in the food. To lessen hygiene concerns, plan activities where foods will be cooked after handling, or allow each child to prepare and eat his own portion. Caution children to avoid licking their fingers since this may spread germs to others; they also risk contracting food-borne illness by tasting or eating uncooked foods containing egg or meat products (i.e., cookie dough, undercooked meat). There are many cultural differences in how foods are served or eaten; in certain cultures it is acceptable for family members to eat from a single bowl or to eat with their hands and fingers. Explain to children that in preschool, they will use individual bowls and utensils.
2.0 Nutrition Choices

For preschoolers, food selections and preferences are primarily based on familiarity, taste, and the sensory feelings associated with certain foods. In addition, the roles children have at mealtimes will vary depending on the family and culture. Offering a variety of cooking activities and foods ensures that each child can relate to some of them. As children share family stories and try new foods, they begin to show respect for food preferences of other children and families. This provides a model of inclusion and allows children to learn from one another.

The learning objectives and concepts should be appropriate for children’s ages and development. Preschoolers can understand that “these foods help us grow” and “those foods help us get strong”; however, discussion of specific food nutrients (e.g., foods rich in vitamin C) is usually beyond their comprehension. Emphasize growth and development in terms that children recognize, such as height, weight, strength, running, and jumping (gross motor abilities). Encourage children’s conversation about foods and how they help the body; the goal is to achieve balanced nutrition and healthy growth. Limit discussion about weight gain, obesity, or dieting. Help children understand that it is important to eat a variety of foods and to eat in moderation (i.e., self-regulation of eating).

Obesity is an excess percentage of body weight caused by fat and puts people at risk for many health problems. In children older than two years of age, obesity is assessed by a measure called the body mass index (BMI). BMI is calculated from a child’s height and weight. One out of seven low-income, preschool-age children is obese, but the obesity epidemic may be stabilizing. The prevalence of obesity in low-income two- to four-year-olds increased from 12.4 percent in 1998 to 14.5 percent in 2003 but rose to only 14.6 percent in 2008. Childhood obesity continues to be a leading public health concern that disproportionately affects low-income and minority children. Children who are obese in their preschool years are more likely to be obese in adolescence and adulthood and to develop diabetes, hypertension, asthma, and sleep apnea.

Ms. Juana notices that three of her five children did not serve themselves any carrots or green beans on their lunch plates. This was a pattern she had observed for several days: the children ate most of their lunch but ignored the vegetables. Ms. Juana takes a bite of carrots and comments, “These are yummy orange carrots. I am glad we are having them for lunch today. They are one of my favorite vegetables!” Amelia expresses, “I don’t like green beans. They’re yucky!” Jonas agrees with Amelia; and Tommy signs, “I don’t like nasty green stuff.” Ms. Juana asks the children what foods they like to eat at home. The children begin to name foods such as kimchi, tofu, cabbage, pineapple, and frijoles. “I have an idea. Why don’t we make a list of all the foods that we like and then find pictures? It will be fun to see the colors of the foods we like to eat!”
Children often reject new foods, at least initially. Teachers may introduce vegetables and other new foods in creative ways that are appealing to children. At snack time, carrots could be served as thin strips with low-fat dip or grated and included in muffins. Stories such as “Stone Soup” or “The Vegetable Group” could be followed by tasting a different vegetable each day. Begin to incorporate foods commonly eaten at home into the meal service and include them in food activities as appropriate.

Ms. Tsikudo has invited Ava’s mother, Zhiying, to tell the class about Taiwan. Zhiying was born and grew up in Taiwan. Zhiying has brought many family photos, as well as photos of the beautiful scenery of Taiwan. After showing the photos and taking questions from children, she shares with children a large durian and a few star fruits, fruits that people in Taiwan like to eat. Ms. Tsikudo helps to carry the durian on a plate and moves around the class to ask children to touch it. “How does the skin feel?” “Bumpy!” Children reply with excitement. Meanwhile, Zhiying has sliced the star fruits and starts to pass them around. “What do the pieces look like?” she asks. “Stars!” reply the children. Ms. Tsikudo picks up one slice of star fruit, puts it into her mouth, and says “I have never had star fruit before. Yum! I like the taste of this fruit. Who wants to try?” Some children raise their hands to try the fruit.

In this vignette, Ms. Tsikudo introduces children to fruits they are not familiar with. She effectively engages a family and models openness to trying a new food. Through food, children also learn about another country, which is relevant to one of their peers.

Interactions and Strategies

Model and coach children’s behavior.
It is recommended that children and adults eat from the same menu unless a child or adult is on a restricted diet (e.g., for food allergies, diabetes, religious requirements). Adults who are on weight-management programs can adhere to their diet by eating healthy foods in moderation. Encourage children’s mealtime conversation about topics that interest children; topics may include food, but it is not necessary to discuss food.

Encourage children to share information about family meals. Explore cultural diversity and children’s respect for self and others by talking with children about what or how their family eats at home. Discuss similarities and differences and promote acceptance of differ-
ent family styles. Teachers may lead the discussion to specific topics about family eating practices: where family members eat (e.g., at a table with chairs, or on the floor at a low table), where they purchase or receive food (e.g., grocery store, open-air market, or food co-op), or who prepares the meals (e.g., male or female parent, extended family member, children assisting). Discussion may focus on types of foods, such as breads (e.g., tortillas, rolls, loaves, white or brown), favorite fruits or vegetables (e.g., apples, bananas, papayas, mangoes, kiwi), or words in children’s home languages for various foods. Children may wish to share their food choices; for example, some children may avoid foods such as peanuts or shellfish because of food allergies, pork or beef because of religious or cultural practices, or meats and dairy products to follow a vegetarian diet.

Encourage role playing. Occasionally provide place mats, tablecloths, centerpiece, or napkins to share with children examples of table settings that represent the diversity of families. Explain that some families may not use table settings or utensils, some families may eat the same food every day, and some families have a lot of food and others do not have very much. Include table-setting items, pretend foods, cooking utensils, aprons, pot holders, menus, and other items in interest areas to promote role play.

Serve meals and snacks family-style. At “family-style” meals, adults and children eat together, share the same menu, and talk with each other in an informal way. Family-style dining promotes beneficial activities that children might experience in their home environment, including decision making, self-help skills, and sharing and social skills. Assist children, as needed, while allowing them to serve their own food; this helps them develop decision-making skills as they choose how much of each food to put on their plate. Children can serve milk from a small pitcher into their cup or take their own milk carton from a tray. Be aware of each child’s developmental skills and provide appropriate serving utensils (e.g., easy-grip tongs and serving spoons) and adaptive eating utensils. Always consider safety and sanitation; do not allow children to serve finger foods or foods that are very warm.

Encourage tasting and decision making. Foods that are familiar, look and smell good, and are served in child-sized portions are more appetizing to young children. Encourage children to taste all foods, but do not compel them to taste or eat certain foods. It can take many “tastes” before a child really decides if he or she likes or dislikes a new food. Try serving foods prepared in different ways (e.g., raw, grilled, steamed, cut in shapes); offer foods as part of a cooking activity or snack; and combine familiar foods with new foods (e.g., shredded carrots added to muffin mix, carrot salad, with low-fat dressing). Always be aware of individual food restrictions, and help children make appropriate choices.
Integrate nutrition education with other learning areas. Sing songs to familiarize children with new foods and new terms. For example, the “Peanut Butter Song” addresses learning about foods (e.g., peanut butter and jelly), where foods originate (e.g., “dig ‘em”), vocabulary (e.g., berry, bite, chew, spread), fine motor skills (e.g., “pick ‘em, smash ‘em, spread ‘em”), and body functions (e.g., chew it, swallow it). Discuss how some children eat in different ways (e.g., with a feeding tube).

Research Highlight

A food allergy occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks a food protein. When the body recognizes a food as harmful, the immune system—which fights infection and disease—reacts to protect the body. Sometimes the reaction is excessive or inappropriate. The immune system reacts by producing certain types of antibodies (Immunoglobulin E, or IgE). These antibodies are created after the first or subsequent exposures to a food or ingredient. The body then has a defense if exposed to that food again, resulting in symptoms of an allergic reaction. The symptoms may be mild (e.g., rashes, hives, itching, swelling) or severe (e.g., trouble breathing, wheezing, loss of consciousness). A food allergy can be fatal. Scientists estimate that 12 million Americans suffer from food allergies. Avoiding the allergy-causing food is the only way to prevent a reaction.

A child who has had a severe reaction previously may have a doctor-prescribed auto-injector of epinephrine (such as EpiPen Jr.™ or Twinject™). Injectable epinephrine should be administered only if prescribed for that child by a physician.

Provide choices for children. Snack times and mealtimes provide a wonderful opportunity for children to practice decision-making skills. Giving choices also helps children feel empowered, thus preventing food battles over what children will and will not eat. During meals, serve all foods at one time and allow children to taste and eat foods in the order they prefer. If possible, offer a choice of two items at snack time. Two different beverages (e.g., milk or juice) may be offered with crackers, or two types of cheese may be served with crackers and water.
Self-Regulation of Eating

Children are born with an innate ability to control their food intake and balance their diet (except when affected by rare genetic conditions, such as Prader Willi syndrome\(^5\)). When infants are hungry, they cry. Usually, the result is that they are fed and their hunger is alleviated. Further, they learn that by crying, they not only receive food and feel better, but also develop feelings of security while being held and cuddled. As children grow, they begin to recognize specific needs and distinguish between feelings, such as being hungry (i.e., needing food) or being sad (e.g., needing encouragement).

Teachers help children become aware of and responsible for their bodies. Children learn to wash their hands before eating and to brush their teeth after eating. If they say they are tired, teachers let them rest. Once children begin to master these skills, teachers provide opportunities for them to do these things independently, with gentle coaching and reminders. The same approach is used when teaching self-regulation of eating (i.e., to listen to the body's signs of hunger and fullness).

As children learn their own hunger and fullness cues, teachers continue to encourage them to communicate when they are full or hungry and to demonstrate it through mealtime-serving and eating practices. Adults are responsible for providing nutritious, appetizing foods in an appropriate setting. Children are responsible for how much or even whether they eat. Children generally do not eat everything presented; they eat only what pleases them on a particular day. A child may eat only one or two food items; or they may eat a lot one day and a little the next.

Teachers help children to recognize and follow their bodies' internal cues of hunger and fullness. It is key to developing healthy eating habits and preventing childhood obesity. Teachers may encourage children to taste new foods, eat a variety of foods (e.g., different colors, shapes, tastes), and help them self-serve appropriate portions of each food. Children may be more comfortable taking small portions if they know they are able to have second servings.

Mrs. Brown is assisting her preschoolers as they prepare for their family-style lunch. Today is Jin’s turn to help set the table, so he places plates, cups, forks, spoons, and napkins for each child. After washing their hands, the children sit at the table and begin to self-serve the foods. “Please use the tongs to get your tortillas,” Mrs. Brown gently reminds the children as they pass the serving bowls.
Throughout the meal, children take their time to enjoy the different food tastes. Mrs. Brown sits with the children and encourages conversations about topics that interest them. “Can I have another tortilla?” asks Jared. “Yes, there are enough for everyone to have another,” replies Mrs. Brown.

Tavon takes a small spoonful of beans but does not take any of the rice or tortillas. Mrs. Brown cuts a tortilla into fourths and asks Tavon if he would like to try a small tortilla. Sarah is eating quickly, and Mrs. Brown gently reminds her to please slow down and chew her foods and enjoy the tastes.

Jared and several other children request second helpings of food. Sarah takes another tortilla, but after a bite or two she stops eating and says, “I don’t want any more.” Mrs. Brown has observed that Sarah generally eats only one helping of food and knows Sarah will be hungry again at snack time. “If you are full, you can stop eating. You can stay at the table and talk with us, or you can go play in the book center.”

It is amazing, thinks Mrs. Brown, that children can have such different reactions to the same plate of food. Some children are very slow eaters and occasionally need a reminder of how long they have in order to finish their meal, while others cannot seem to control their eating.

Children have a variety of appetites, food preferences, and eating habits. It is important to guide and support them at mealtimes. The majority of children are born with natural feelings of hunger and fullness, and it is the adults’ responsibility to help children recognize and maintain this ability to control their appetite and eating. Teachers can help children by giving them the opportunity to self-serve foods and make decisions about what and how much to eat. Providing easy-to-grasp serving utensils that provide appropriate-size portions is important; then, if they wish, children can choose to have second servings. Serve all foods, including fruits, which are often considered dessert, at the same time and allow children to eat foods in the order or combination they prefer.

Some children may live in “food-insecure homes” (i.e., homes with a shortage of food) and may need to eat more at preschool. Have additional servings available, especially on Monday mornings or mornings after holidays away from preschool, to allow children additional food as desired. These children may also choose to eat more on Fridays since they may not have enough food at home.
Interactions and Strategies

Offer a variety of nutritious, appetizing foods in small portions. A general guideline is to provide one tablespoon of each type of food for each year of the child’s age. Allow additional servings if children are hungry; encourage children to eat only until they are satisfied (i.e., full). Assist children as they serve themselves, using easy-to-grasp serving utensils for child-sized servings. Provide adaptive eating utensils for children with special physical needs. Offer water throughout the day.

Encourage children to chew their food well and eat slowly. Chewing allows children to taste foods more intensely, reduces the possibility of choking, and allows the body time to feel fullness. Occasionally singing songs before meal or snacks, such as “Chew, Chew, Chew Your Food,” is a good way to remind children to chew their food completely.56

(Sung to the tune of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”)

Chew, chew, chew your food
A little at a time
Chew it slow, chew it well
Chew it to this rhyme

Teach children to recognize signs of hunger. Observe each child’s appetite and eating habits and share this information with families. At mealtimes and snack times, encourage children to decide how much to eat and to stop eating when they feel full. Help preschool children learn the body’s signals, such as a stomach “growl” or an empty feeling.57 Help them become aware of how these feelings change when they eat food. Children may visualize empty and full by pouring water into a glass. Use a frame of reference that allows children to construct their own understanding of “full” and “too much” through their home languages and their experiences. For example, you might ask, “How would you feel if you ate too much?” (“I would have a tummy ache”) or “How would you feel if you ran too much?” (“I would be tired”). Children can learn about “too much” by experiencing things that are too heavy to carry, seeing clothes that are too big for a doll, or having too many blocks for a container.

Discuss how the body uses food. Young children may not be able to understand the digestive process; however, they can begin to understand that their bodies need food and water. As children grow and begin to understand that there are internal body parts, they may find it fascinating to be introduced to what happens to food after it is swallowed. This conversation may also lead to discussion of toileting, so be prepared. Before meals, ask, “Who is hungry?” and “How do you know you are hungry?” After mealtime, discuss feelings of fullness.

Reinforce learning throughout the day. Nutrition education can take place throughout the day with conversation about foods before meals and during meals, cooking activities, pretend play, and story time, and through music.

Integrate eating with language and socialization. Children can learn much from conversation that takes place at the table. Conversation should be on topics interest children and may take place in the children’s home languages. While talking about the foods being served, discuss the morning activities, a book that was just read, or an upcoming field trip or picnic. Encourage children to come up with topics. Keep in mind that children often enjoy talking about “boogers” or body functions that may not be appropriate during mealtime. If this occurs, gently guide the conversation to more suitable topics.
“I don’t like that.” Every day at lunch for the past three weeks, Amy said the same thing. She would eat the meat and fruit but would not taste any vegetables or bread. Mr. Rios asked Mrs. Gardner, Amy’s grandmother, “What does Amy like to eat at home?” Mrs. Gardner replied, “She has never eaten very much at one time, and now all she wants is mashed potatoes. She looks healthy, but I’m worried about her.”

Mr. Rios continued to observe Amy’s eating habits and encouraged her to try other foods. As the children served their plates, he asked them about the different colors and smells. Using small serving utensils, he encouraged each child to take a small amount. If a child said he did not want it, Mr. Rios assured him that he did not have to eat it but gently encouraged him to put a tiny bit on his plate.

As Mr. Rios planned learning activities for the following weeks, he included a cooking activity along with snack time two days each week. He involved children’s families by asking them to send ideas or simple recipes for favorite snack foods. Through these activities, the children were introduced to different foods, some new and some familiar, and various methods of food preparation (e.g., cooked versus raw, single food versus combined foods).

Children learn about food and develop food preferences through their direct experiences with food (i.e., handling, preparing, eating) and by observing the eating behaviors of adults and peers. The goal in preschool is that children will learn to eat a variety of nutritious foods and begin to recognize the body’s physical need for food (i.e., hunger and fullness). Through modeling, repeated and various exposures to food, and social experiences, children begin to develop eating behaviors that can prevail throughout life.

**Engaging Families**

✔ Provide families with weekly or monthly meal and snack menus in their home languages. Recognize that families have the most information about the food preferences, serving styles, and restrictions in eating habits of their children.

✔ Offer workshops and information on nutritious and economical meals based on the families’ cultural, ethnic, and personal food preferences. Encourage parents to use available community resources on how to plan meals.

✔ Provide lists of foods or simple recipes for a variety of foods that are
high in nutrients; are low in fat, salt, or sugar; and look and taste great. Include foods that reflect cultural preferences and that are locally accessible.

✔ Encourage families to involve children in food preparation through take-home activities. Provide large recipe cards; allow children to decorate cards if desired. Recipes calling for two or three ingredients that families are likely to have on hand will be helpful; include ingredient substitutions if appropriate.

✔ Invite families to share their favorite family recipes. Encourage children to discuss their favorite foods and make a graph of the preferences of the class. Additionally, create a class recipe book as dictated by the children.

✔ Gather information on accessible nutrition resources in the community and provide this information to all families. Check with local planning councils, schools, and community agencies regarding initiatives on childhood obesity, food insecurity, and other nutrition issues.

✔ Invite family members to visit the classroom and encourage them to sit with children during mealtime and participate in or lead nutrition-related activities. Provide opportunities for families to participate in meal planning in the preschool, especially suggesting menu items or meal-service routines related to the family home culture.

✔ Provide information to all families on nutrition, child growth and development, nutrition risk factors (e.g., childhood obesity, diabetes), and community resources. Encourage families to ask questions or provide information about their children’s eating habits or nutritional concerns.

Questions for Reflection

1. How have you integrated cultural food preferences and eating practices of families in planning your nutrition program (e.g., meals, snacks, cooking activities)?
2. What elements of family-style eating have you incorporated into your mealtime and snack-time activities?
3. How have you addressed individual needs (e.g., food allergies, eating difficulties, religious or cultural preferences) when planning cooking activities?
4. What has been your biggest challenge in helping children to learn about and understand hunger and fullness?
5. How do you allow children to self-regulate their eating? Do you allow flexibility at snack time, such as providing a 30-minute window of time? Are children allowed to leave the table when they have eaten all they want?