



## Children and Their Eating

### Ellyn Satter's Guidelines For the School Nutrition Staff

We want our children to be "healthy eaters." But what is a healthy eater? Children who are healthy eaters are able to take care of their food needs in a positive and matter-of-fact way. They are able to enjoy many foods, try others, and politely turn down still others. They are able to rely for the most part on their internal cues for regulating the amounts they eat. But children who are healthy eaters behave differently from adults. Children have their own ways of behaving with eating.

#### Children Push Themselves Along

Children are naturally skeptical about new food and cautious about eating it. *New* can be a food they haven't seen before, a familiar food prepared in a different way, or *someone they don't know doing the cooking*. But life is full of new situations. Children challenge themselves to meet them. The same holds true for eating. Children will work to master new foods and new eating skills, the same as they work to master other skills.

Children learn to like new foods by having them served repeatedly, by seeing their friends eat them and by tasting them many times.

#### Children Need Moral Support to Do a Good Job with Eating

Children eat better when there are supportive adults in the eating situation, being friendly, being companionable, but NOT being managing about the child's eating. Children eat better when school nutrition personnel know them and pleasantly greet them by name, when the environment is comfortable and safe for them, when their teacher or someone else they trust sits down with them to eat, and when they have plenty of time to eat.

#### Children Need to Feel in Control of Their Eating

Children eat better when they can pick and choose from foods that are available and decide whether—and how much—they are going to eat. They need

the freedom to turn down food they don't want—or the reassurance that they can choose not to eat something they have taken. They benefit from knowing they can taste a food and decide not to finish it. When children know they have an "out" with food, they do more and dare more than if they get the feeling they "have" to eat. The offer-versus-serve School Nutrition policy gives children an out with their eating.

#### Children Are Erratic about Eating

Children have built into them the ability to eat a variety. At home as well as at school, they eat a lot one day and a little the next, accept a food enthusiastically one day and turn it down the next. They also know how much they need to eat. Their internal sense of hunger, appetite and fullness is stronger than adults', and they eat the right amount to grow properly. They are more likely than adults to stop when they are full rather than when the food is gone.

#### Children Waste Food

Household food consumption surveys show that plate waste goes up when there are children in the family. Adults tend to clean their plates and eat the expensive foods (like meat, vegetables, fruits and sweets). Children do not. And they often don't finish their milk. A certain amount of waste is inevitable in the school food service setting. But waste goes down as children learn to like foods that are new to them.

#### Children Won't Eat Food That Is Unappealing to Them

Food rejection has as much to do with the child as with the foods. Adults eat food because they like it, but they also eat food that doesn't taste the best to them because the food is good for them or because they paid for it or to keep from getting hungry later. Children don't. They eat because food tastes good. And they eat what hits them right at the time. While attractive and well-prepared food that is generally familiar is important in allowing children to eat better, it doesn't do the whole job. Children have bigger appetites some days than others. They grow faster some times than others. Some generally-favorite foods don't taste good to them some days.

#### Children Need Limits

Children do not benefit from being

allowed to say "YUK!" when they are offered food. They benefit from learning to be respectful of other people's feelings—whether those are feelings of staff about the food they have prepared or their friends' feelings about what they like to eat. They benefit from learning to turn down food politely (a simple "no thank you" will do), to be matter-of-fact about choosing not to eat something, and to be subtle about getting something back out of their mouth when they don't feel like swallowing. If children are rude about food, look for pressure. They may be fighting back against pressure to eat certain amounts or types of food.

#### Feeding Demands a Division of Responsibility

The school nutrition staff can only provide a variety of attractive, wholesome food in pleasant surroundings and work with the administration to encourage positive approaches to feeding. *That's a lot!* After that, it is up to the children to eat. They have their own kinky ways of going about it, so taken on a day-to-day basis, it can *look* like they aren't accepting foods at all well. But over the long term, children *will* eat, and they *will* learn to like a variety of food. Putting pressure on children to increase food acceptance or decrease food waste will backfire. Children eat less well, not better, when they are forced, bribed, or coaxed to eat.

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