



## Healthy Menu Planning



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## Considerations for Planning Menus

### Menus for young children should:

- Meet the nutritional needs of children
- Comply with any funding or licensing requirements
- Help children feel comfortable by serving familiar foods
- Encourage healthy food habits by introducing new foods
- Provide safe food prepared and served in clean surroundings
- Stay within budgetary limits
- Provide alternatives for children with food allergies
- Consider children's opinions about food they like
- Consider the preferences of the families in your program

### Menu Planning Principles

Menu planning for young children can be exciting as well as challenging. Keep in mind basic menu-planning principles as well as your children's preferences.

The five basic menu-planning principles explained on the following pages are:

1. Strive for balance
- 2. Emphasize variety**
3. Add contrast
- 4. Think about color**
5. Consider eye appeal

#### Basic Food Groups

Grains  
Meats  
Fruits and Vegetables  
Dairy



There are a number of ways to achieve these menu-planning goals:

#### Flavors

Be sure the meal is neither too bland nor too strongly flavored. Young children's taste buds can be more sensitive than yours. Think about whether the flavors of the foods you are serving together make a good combination.

#### Fat

Balance higher-fat foods with foods that have less fat. Avoid serving too many higher-fat foods within the same week. For example, if you already have pizza on the weekly menu, do not include another higher-fat entrée. You should also use low-fat side dishes to balance the meal. For example, serve raw vegetable sticks like carrots or fresh fruit with the pizza.



### Variety

No one food or group of foods can give children all the nutrition they need. Avoid planning the same form of food on consecutive days. To add variety, you could serve a casserole one day, soup and sandwiches the next. Periodically introduce new items by adding a small amount to the meal. For example, if you are serving raw carrot sticks, add some raw cauliflower too. Try preparing familiar foods in a different way or in a new recipe.

### Contrast

Provide contrasts in textures, flavors and methods of preparation. Serve a crisp salad with spaghetti or crunchy apple slices with yogurt. You can also use a combination of different shapes and sizes of food. For example, an appealing meal to a young child might consist of cubed peaches, a slice of meatloaf and a small mound of mashed potatoes.

### Color

A variety of color not only makes a meal more appealing to look at, it also ensures that you are getting a variety of nutrients. For example, orange and yellow fruits and vegetables like apricots and sweet potatoes are high in vitamin A. Green vegetables are rich in minerals such as calcium, potassium and iron.

### Menu Cycling

Cycling menus may be a good option for your program. "Menu Cycles" are planned for a period of time and then repeated.

#### Menu Cycles are beneficial because:

- They offer variety, are flexible and allow for substitutions.
- They can save you time from doing repetitive tasks such as gathering information, planning menus and selecting and pricing foods.
- It is easy to include seasonal fruits and vegetable and plan for special events.
- You can plan for special activities and events well in advance because you know what your menu will be.

#### If you choose to use Menu Cycles, consider:

- Planning four cycles - Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall - to take advantage of seasonal foods.
- Planning four to six weeks of menus for a cycle and then repeating. Compare the first and last menus of the cycles so that you are not repeating foods too closely together. For example, if you are serving spaghetti on Friday of the last week of one Cycle Menu, make sure you do not have spaghetti on Monday of the first week of your next Cycle Menu.
- Noting substitution of foods on menus.

### Guidelines for Healthy Meals and Snacks

Providing healthy meals and snacks provides children with the nutrition they need and helps to develop good eating habits that will increase the likelihood that they will eat healthfully throughout their lives.

#### Some ideas to consider:

- Offer fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables.
- Provide simple foods. Most children prefer foods that are unmixed and easy to recognize.

- Limit foods high in salt, sugar or fat.
- Find healthy recipes that are child-friendly by searching the Internet or checking out books at your local library.

### Limit Salt and Sugar

- Avoid adding salt when cooking meals.
- Check nutrition labels and choose foods with the lowest sodium content.
- Read labels to find “hidden” sugars in food.
- Limit sugar by avoiding processed desserts, candy, canned fruits with syrup, soft drinks or punch.
- Use fresh fruit and 100% fruit juice to add sweetness to food. For example, offer bananas instead of sugar with hot cereal.
- Serve oatmeal cookies, preferably home-made, in place of pre-made cookies that are frosted, contain chocolate or a sweet, processed filling.

### Limit Fat

- Instead of frying foods like potatoes, bake them.
- Limit the amount of butter or margarine when preparing foods. For example, do not add butter or margarine to cooked vegetables.
- When serving toast or bread, use only a very small amount of butter or margarine for taste.
- Avoid putting butter on pancakes or waffles. Instead, offer applesauce or other fruit to enhance the flavor.

### Avoid Processed Foods

Processed foods are often high in sugar, fat and salt and low in nutrition. Some tips to remember are:

- If the cooking directions are “heat and eat,” it is probably a processed food.
- When selecting cheese, avoid products that are labeled “processed cheese food.” Choose mild cheeses made with milk.



- Make your own chicken nuggets. Start by looking for simple recipes on the Internet or in cook books in your local library.
- Start a fruit or vegetable garden in your program and let the children eat the foods they harvest.

### Making Meal Times Pleasant

Meal times should be a pleasant experience for young children. It is a great time for friendly conversation, community-building, experiencing new foods and modeling habits of healthy eating and social etiquette (“please” and “thank you”).

### Serving meals

- Young children should not go more than three hours without being offered something to eat.
- Serve meals “family style,” sitting with the children and eating your food.
- Allow children to help with the meals whenever possible. Young children can snap beans, tear lettuce for salads and serve themselves. They could spread cream cheese on a bagel or mix a yogurt-based fruit dip.
- Always offer water with snacks that do not include a drink.



### Introducing New Foods

- Serve new foods along with familiar foods.
- Serve as a model by tasting the food yourself.
- Talk about the taste and texture of the food.
- Offer new foods slowly and gradually, introducing only one new food at a time.

### Age Considerations and Nutrition

Children of different ages have different nutritional needs. Depending on their age, they may prefer different types of foods as well. Consider the ages of the children in your program when planning menus.

#### Infants

- Work closely with parents to make sure you are meeting the needs of each infant. Many infants are on an individualized plan for introducing new foods that families coordinate with their child's health care provider.



- Hold infants when feeding them a bottle.
- Support mothers who choose to breastfeed.
- Infants should be fed on demand instead of feeding them according to a clock schedule. Get to know the infants in your care so that you can recognize when they are hungry.

#### Toddlers

Toddlers are increasingly independent and often love the word "no." They may refuse to try new foods, making it difficult to ensure that they are receiving an adequate diet.



- Toddlers need to have meals and snacks often because of their small stomachs.
- Offer foods to toddlers from all food groups at each meal.
- Toddler serving sizes are approximately 1/4 that of an adult serving for each food (the exception is the milk, which is half).
- Toddlers' slower rate of growth causes a decrease in appetite. Keep in mind that children will eat when they are hungry.

#### Preschoolers

- Preschoolers grow in spurts. During active growth periods, their appetites are usually good, but remember that when growth rates slow, so do their appetites.
- The main difference between feeding a toddler and a preschooler is the amount of food you offer.



- Preschoolers should never be encouraged to “clean their plates,” as this can often lead to obesity later in life.
- Offer smaller servings and let children ask for more.

### School-age Children

- School-age children enjoy preparing their own snacks
- When school-age children arrive at your program after school, it may have been several hours since they have eaten. Have a healthy, nutritious snack ready for them when they arrive.
- School-age children enjoy cooking. Cooking activities and special projects are a great opportunity to talk about healthy eating.



### Serving Sizes and Regulations

State licensing agencies or your local Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) may also have specific serving sizes that must be offered to children at each meal based on their age. Be sure to check with your local licensing agency or CACFP (if your program participates in the CACFP program) to ensure that you are offering the correct serving sizes.