

# Adults Influence What Children Eat

Source: Family and Consumer Sciences Newsletter, CCE-Wyoming County. April 2003.



Parents and childcare providers are often referred to as the "gatekeepers", deciding which foods to offer and when meals and snacks will be served. Adults may influence the eating practices of children in the childcare setting in diverse and complex ways. Early studies have suggested that preschool children were more likely to eat foods if they saw an adult eat the foods. Developing healthy eating habits is of prime importance to preschoolers. Establishing a routine of offering children three meals a day plus snacks may help motivate children to eat a variety of foods at each meal.

Early parental influence has an enduring effect on an individual's feeding practices. When adults select or ignore certain foods, they are simply connecting to those same food choices parents made for them in early childhood.

## **There are a number of ways parents can influence preschool children's eating practices...**

- Parents can control foods that enter the household and how that food is prepared.
- Parents determine where, when, and how often the family eats outside the home.
- When children observe their parents eating an unfamiliar food, they are more receptive to trying the new food. Studies have demonstrated that if mothers are unwilling to try new food the children may model their parent's dislike for the same new foods.
- Parents can influence whether the child, based on the food socialization practices of the family, receives a particular food optimistically or pessimistically.

## **To make the most of meal and snack time try to...**

- Make sure meals are both attractive and tasty.
- Encourage social interaction. Teach children the social aspects of dining as well as how to feed themselves.
- Make mealtime a happy time. Provide a transition or quiet time just before meals so that mealtime can be relaxed.
- Avoid making children feel rushed. Allow children to take their own time to eat. Having to eat in a hurry may spoil the pleasure of eating. Short meal times may also encourage poor eating habits. For example, children who are feeling pressured may choose to quickly consume their favorite foods and ignore other nutritious foods in their meal. They may learn to eat too rapidly, a habit that may lead to overeating and obesity.

Parents are responsible for the kind of food is offered to children and the manner in which it is offered. Children decide if and how much of the offered food is eaten. Food preferences of the child should be considered when meals are being planned. Eating

should be an enjoyable experience for children. The responsibility for providing the pleasant environments that will enhance this experience falls upon the parents.