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Creating Good Food Habits—Start Young, Never Quit

Food habits begin to form almost as soon as a child is born. They result from repeated experience with food and are modified, rather easily in the early years, as experience changes.

The first modification is in spacing meals to eliminate nighttime feedings. Later, a variety of foods are added to the baby's diet.

Food habits the child forms while very young and the modifications he makes as he grows and develops are good food habits when they meet his current individual needs for nutrients and for food energy. The child's needs change while he grows and matures, and so his food practices need to be adapted as these changes occur.

The greater the variety of foods which children know and enjoy, the easier it is to make these adaptations as they are needed.

There are several conditions in life that influence the assortment of foods a person will eat. One is the socio-economic level into which a child is born. The foods a mother gives her baby must be selected from the variety of foods available to her economically. The young child of the poor family gains experience primarily with

low-cost foods. These may or may not be good choices. The fact remains that the variety of foods that this child learns to eat and to enjoy is limited by cost.

The young child of a wealthy family will probably have experience with a greatly different variety of foods. Again, these may or may not be good choices. The variety of foods this child learns to eat and enjoy is not limited by cost but undoubtedly is limited by one or more of the other conditions of life that influence choices.

The ethnic background of the family influences the variety of foods and the methods of food preparation that the young child experiences. If the family came fairly recently from a rice-eating country, rice will probably be one of the first foods the young child will learn to eat.

Religion may also influence the variety of foods that a child experiences. Some groups forgo certain foods at all times and some abstain from the use of particular foods at specified times. The foods that will be given to a young child in one of these families will naturally be in line with dictates of the family's religion.

The most direct influence, however, is the parents themselves—their food preferences, attitudes toward food, and their information about the nutritive value of foods.

It is extremely difficult for a mother not to communicate in some way her dislike for a food she is feeding her child because she believes "it is good for him." Often the child resists this particular food even when the mother consciously tries to mask her own lack of preference.

It is difficult to interest a small child in a food which one family member refuses even to taste. How often that Johnnie will not eat a particular food because his father complains every time the food is served!

Sometimes the experiences parents

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have had cause them to severely limit the variety of foods they make available to their children. For example, on visiting a school where an informal breakfast survey was in progress some years ago, we found the school nurse concerned about one child's breakfast records. The little girl reported she had cream of wheat, brewer's yeast, bonemeal, and rose hip powder for her breakfast every morning. Investigation revealed that her parents had been interned in a concentration camp during World War II. Upon liberation, they were taken to England for treatment of the severe dietary deficiencies they had suffered. The therapeutic diet included brewer's yeast, bonemeal, and rose hip powder. These parents wanted to be sure their child would never suffer as they had. This, of course, is an extreme instance, but many parents today limit the variety of foods because of their beliefs about health and the wholesomeness of food.

We have named several conditions that tend to limit the variety of foods our children learn to eat and enjoy. There are other conditions that tend to extend the variety of foods that children will eat.

Fortunately, children do not spend all their formative years in the confines of their homes under the influence only of the immediate family. Most children, at an early age, have experience with other children. How many times have you heard a child say to his mother, "I want some of what Janie has." Often this is an opportunity to help a child learn to enjoy some fruit or vegetable that has been previously rejected.

As the child grows older, he has experience with other adults whom he comes to regard highly. His first teacher often becomes important to him. If the teacher has a wholesome attitude toward food and sets a good example, she helps to extend the variety of food that the child will accept and enjoy.

Drastic changes in the food supply also may extend variety. For example,

during the food rationing of World War II, families were forced to use or to increase the use of foods that had not been on their usual shopping list. After the rationing was over some people, particularly children and young folks, had discovered foods such as a variety of fish that they could eat with enjoyment.

Children who participate in the National School Lunch program often learn to know and enjoy foods not usually available to them in the home. Repeated experiences with desirable food practices tend to help the child develop good eating habits.

Family mobility tends to acquaint children with a wider variety of foods. Fortunately, families usually stay in one place long enough for the family members to acquire a taste for some of the new foods.

If an individual's food choices, day after day, fail to meet his needs for energy and nutrients, his food habits are poor and over time will cause health problems.

The U.S. food supply has such variety and abundance that food combinations which will lead to an adequate diet are innumerable.

Acceptance of a wide variety of foods increases the likelihood and ease of achieving an adequate diet, but is no assurance that such a diet will result. Some information about combining of foods is necessary.

Nutritionists have translated recommendations of the Food and Nutrition Board, National Research Council-National Academy of Sciences, into servings of food and compiled them into reliable, easy-to-follow food guides. One such guide, "Food for Fitness—A Daily Food Guide," is available from the Office of Information, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

This guide divides food into four broad groups, allowing a great deal of choice within each group. If the specified number of servings from each food group are eaten, a good nutritional foundation will be assured. Extra servings of these and other foods to round

out meals and to meet individual needs for food energy are desirable.

It is much easier to develop and maintain good food habits in young children than it is to correct any poor habits as children grow older. Considering the way most people in the United States live and work today, this requires the concerted cooperative efforts of all those who deal with children at meal or snack time. Here are some pointers:

- At home. Parents profoundly influence the attitudes and habits of their children. Children develop preferences for particular foods from the assortment of food served them. Likes or dislikes are developed upon the basis of flavor, consistency, texture, and the like.

All food rejected may not be disliked. Children may refuse to taste foods they see other family members avoid or those that for some reason are unappealing to them. When the latter occurs, it is wise to wait until another day and matter-of-factly offer the food again.

During the preschool or pre-nursery school years, parents are solely responsible for providing the nutritional guidance which results in desirable eating habits—setting a good example and providing a good variety of foods. By this means, parents convey to their young children that all food is good and should at least be tasted. A wholesome attitude toward food and a willingness to accept new foods or different methods of preparation is the first big step in developing and maintaining desirable eating habits. We eat food because it tastes good! The fact it is good for us is a bonus rather than an acceptable reason—for young children—for eating it.

After they enter school, children continue to need an example set for them at home, especially at breakfast time. One way to provide such an example is for both parents to allow enough time every morning to eat an adequate breakfast themselves.

Parents influence schoolchildren as well as preschool tots. Parents who are permissive so long as suitable choices are made often find it easier to guide their children when selections need modification. Boys and girls will often add the milk or fruit needed to round out the meal if they can have the “poor boy” or “hero” sandwich they want.

Learning to eat a variety of foods will proceed faster if parents will serve at home the important foods studied in school or that are included in the school lunch. Parents can also help their children to establish good food habits by encouraging them to participate in the school lunch even though the children may not yet have learned to enjoy some of the foods served.

In recent years, mothers working, consolidation of schools, and other changes in family and community life cause millions of children to eat some of their meals away from home and often without any supervision. Responsibility for the food habits of these children becomes a shared one.

- In nursery school. Although parents do and should have responsibility for the nutritional health of their children, the nursery school can support the home by serving for meals and snacks a variety of foods which contribute very substantially toward meeting the child's daily needs for nutrients and food energy. Children respond better to food if the surroundings are pleasant and the adult is understanding but firm about it being time to eat together.

Further, the child should have an opportunity to participate in activities that will help him extend the variety of foods he will eat. Tasting parties and games at snack time that motivate the child to taste unfamiliar or previously rejected foods are very good activities for this purpose.

The greatest contributions the nursery school can make to achievement of good eating habits are (1) providing well-chosen foods that look good and

taste good to the children and (2) a continuing wholesome attitude toward all food on the part of adults who work with the children.

- In the school classroom. The classroom teacher has many opportunities to reinforce good teaching begun in the home by including at all grade levels well-chosen experiences with food in the classroom. Accurate nutrition information suitable to the age and maturity of the children can also be presented in such subject matter areas as health, science, social studies, and language arts.

In the primary grades, it is important that children learn that all food is good. Up to this time, the child has had the opportunity to learn to eat the foods included in the family food pattern. Now he can increase the variety of foods he knows by becoming familiar with those included in the food patterns of his classmates and the children he learns about.

The teacher takes the place of the mother during the school day. Her enthusiasm for all foods influences the children to taste unfamiliar ones.

If the child has a good example to follow both at home and at school, he will probably enjoy learning to identify the various foods he eats and to investigate and compare the flavors, textures, and consistencies. It is not expected that he learn to enjoy all foods equally well but it is important that he be willing to taste all foods offered to him. If either teacher or parents display a poor attitude toward foods, confusion often results and the youngster may limit the variety of foods he will eat.

In grades four through six, children are learning how to find answers to many questions. These children need the opportunity to decide for themselves that food really does make a difference in how one looks and feels and how well children grow. In these grades, nutrition guidance often becomes a part of science teaching, and

plant growing or animal projects become a means of learning that the kind and amount of food eaten are important to health.

Children of this age often resist getting up in the morning and tend to dawdle while preparing for the day. Thus this group, especially the older ones, often alter earlier good habits by skimping or skipping breakfast. Food habit surveys of schoolchildren reveal that this poor practice tends to persist on through the school career.

Simple breakfasts that children can safely and easily prepare for themselves are good projects at this grade level. These need not always be the usual combinations we associate with breakfast but may be planned around some leftover food basic to family cultural patterns. This is an excellent opportunity to teach children what to put with the preferred food to make a good breakfast of it.

For example, in a neighborhood where many Spanish-American families use beans and rice almost as regularly as other families use bread, children could be encouraged to add tomato juice or some other source of vitamin C and a glass of milk to their usual breakfast of beans and rice.

It is also necessary for pupils to learn that an adequate diet can be made up of many different food combinations. While children are studying other countries in their social studies classes, it is natural that they should include something about the eating patterns of the people.

Teachers who have taught units of this kind report that children enjoy them and seem to learn readily to understand children of other nations and cultures.

Secondary school students are ready to review in an organized fashion the facts they have learned about food in the elementary school. They can then apply those facts as they gain an understanding of the processes involved in utilizing food to meet body needs. Both boys and girls need to develop this understanding in addition

to some facility in making wise choices for themselves.

Desirable attitudes and habits developed in the elementary school years will benefit the boys and girls during adolescence and later as adults. Understanding what happens to food after it is eaten, and ability to select meals which are good nutritionally and a pleasure to eat will encourage students to continue to make good selections for themselves and for any children they may have in the future.

- In school feeding programs. Schools that participate in the federally sponsored school feeding programs have an important resource within the school for providing nutrition guidance to boys and girls. We know it is important for boys and girls to acquire nutrition information, but we learned long ago that being told what to eat to insure good nutritional health does not necessarily result in better food habits among children or adults whose food practices need improvement.

Boys and girls need to have repeated experience with desirable food practices over an extended period if good habit formation is to result. The school lunch and breakfast programs can provide children this day-by-day experience throughout the school career by serving nutritionally sound meals that children will eat.

In any group feeding operation, whether it is a family group of three or four persons or a school population of 300 or 400, it will not be possible to completely please everyone at every meal. No one enjoys all foods equally, but everyone can learn at least to taste all the foods served and possibly acquire a taste for some previously avoided.

School feeding programs continually provide opportunities for boys and girls to eat a good lunch daily—in some schools, breakfast also is served—and at the same time to increase the variety of food they can eat with pleasure. The wholesome attitude of parents and teachers to-

ward all food and the pleasant atmosphere created by a friendly school feeding staff influences students to take advantage of the opportunities to learn to eat well by eating the good meals available every day.

This learning is most likely to take place when meals are planned with a realistic understanding of the children and the communities being served. Meal patterns prescribed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture assure well-balanced meals but are flexible, and preferred foods may be included.

New foods or those most generally avoided are often served as part of a lunch featuring hamburgers, spaghetti, or some other food of high appeal. Thus, the principles of habit formation and learning are applied along with principles of good nutrition.

School feeding programs are most successful when parents, teachers, and administrators understand the objectives and problems involved and cooperate by giving their support.

- Snacks at home and away from home. In recent years there has been less emphasis upon the advisability of limiting food intake to three meals daily. One or two additional small meals or snacks have become a part of our culture. Nutritionally, this is satisfactory so long as the total daily intake of food meets the individual's need for nutrients and does not exceed his need for calories.

Unfortunately, the choices often made at snacktime are relatively concentrated sources of calories but do not contribute much to nutrient needs of the individual.

One way to improve this situation is to make wholesome snacks available to all family members at times and places where snacks are eaten. The family's larder should include good snack choices such as cheese, peanut butter, fruits, raw vegetables, fruit or vegetable juices, and milk.

Gathering places for teenagers and snack bars for office or other workers should be encouraged to at least have



A good lunch served in pleasant surroundings.

fruit and milk vending machines as well as candy and soda pop vending machines.

Food habits are closely associated with the individual's sense of security, and any modification, particularly as he grows older, will require strong motivation.

Modifications in food habits need to be made to adjust to the decreased need for calories as people grow older. The number of overweight people one sees is testimony that they have failed to make the adjustment. For the most part this must be credited to lack of motivation rather than lack of information. How to motivate people to make these adjustments is still an area that needs further study.

Some people are meeting their need for calories—are not overweight—but

are eating a combination of foods that do not supply recommended amounts of all nutrients. It is difficult for such individuals to see a need for change inasmuch as they maintain a desirable weight and thus do not associate any symptoms of poor health they may have with eating habits. Cause and effect are not easily demonstrated.

Much needs to be learned about how to help people make modifications when they are needed. We do know, however, that those who have a good attitude toward all food, a spirit of adventure that prompts them to taste new foods or to try new methods of food preparation, can adjust more easily to modifications in diet whether for health reasons or as a result of limited availability of foods familiar to them.