

Standard 4

Toddler/Child Feeding

Work with families to incorporate healthy eating habits. Highlight opportunities to make small changes over time.

Why is this Standard important?

Healthy habits start early and young children learn from their parents and caregivers around them. It is much easier to build healthy eating habits from the beginning, rather than change unhealthy eating habits later. Families can encourage young children to develop positive eating habits by being a good role model and having realistic expectations for their children. As a home visitor, you can help parents set the stage for healthy eating by sharing strategies and tips for children to learn about different foods in a healthy, positive environment that will nourish their bodies and help them grow.

Help Families Incorporate Healthy Eating Habits:

Support Development of Self-Feeding Skills

Learning to Use a Cup

Infants as young as six months old can start to learn to drink from a cup (with the help of a parent or caregiver.) At age one, toddlers can continue practicing to drink from an open cup at meals and snack times, although spills will likely still happen. Encourage parents to offer plenty of opportunities for little ones to practice with the following tips:

- Use a small, child-sized cup that the child can hold with two hands.
- Pour a small amount of milk or water in the cup to minimize large spills.
- Have paper towels ready for cleaning up and remember that accidents happen.

Practice with Utensils

Infants begin exploring self-feeding with finger feeding. Let parents know this is a normal stage in development and toddlers will begin using utensils like a fork and spoon more consistently as their hand-eye coordination improves.

Parents can invite older children to participate in meal preparation and practice more advanced skills, like using a child-sized dull knife to spread peanut butter on a cracker or to cut a sandwich in half.

*Remind parents to cut food into pieces no larger than ½-inch to avoid choking risk and to continue to supervise children of all ages when they are eating.

Allow Children to Serve Themselves

Family meals are the perfect time to let children practice serving themselves. Parents can minimize food waste by using smaller bowls for children to serve from and teaching them to take small amounts at first.

Try New Foods Together

Parents and caregivers can set a good example by eating and trying new foods with children. Engaging children in multiple steps of meal planning and preparation will help children have a more open and willing attitude to trying new foods. Share the following tips with parents and caregivers:

- Shop together - parents can ask children questions about different foods and see what they might like to try. Encourage curiosity about colors, textures and tastes of various fruits, vegetables and other nutritious foods.
- Eat together - children are more likely to try new foods when they see others trying them as well.
- Be positive - don't force children to try new foods. Everyone has likes and dislikes. Encourage trying new foods without the expectation that children will always like it. It may take several times of introducing a new food before a toddler will try it. Praise them for trying something new.
- Familiar foods are important - when introducing a new food at mealtime, make sure there is at least one menu item your toddler likes. This will help you to know your child will likely eat something and minimize the urge to make something different for them to eat.

Make It Fun

Exploring food should be an enriching experience for children. By making mealtime fun, parents and caregivers allow children to learn about colors, smells, tastes and textures of food in a no-pressure environment. Parents and caregivers can try these ideas to make new foods exciting:

- Use cookie cutters to cut soft foods into fun shapes.
- Arrange fruit and vegetable slices into silly faces or stick people.
- Create a menu using with fun and goofy names.
- Sit together as a family at mealtime.



Have Patience with Picky Eating

Picky eating is a common struggle for many families with young children. Let parents know that this is a normal phase that children go through. Parents and caregivers may see picky eating behaviors in a few different ways, including:

- Disinterest in unfamiliar foods, like fruits and vegetables;
- Food jags—when children may only want to eat the same food over and over for a period of time;
- Avoiding foods with a certain color or texture.

While it can be unsettling for parents to experience picky eating, children typically outgrow these behaviors with time and a supportive environment, as long as a variety of foods continue to be offered. Children are more likely to remain picky eaters if they are never exposed to different foods. Share the following with parents and caregivers to help cope with picky eating.

- Offer Choices
 - Let children decide which fruit to have with lunch, for example.
 - Include familiar, well-liked foods with new foods.
 - Involve picky eaters in food shopping. Allow them to choose a new food to try and prepare it together at home.
- Be Consistent
 - Prepare the same meals and snacks for the entire family. Avoid preparing special meals for just one child or separate meals for children and parents.
 - Try to have regularly scheduled meals and snacks. Children will feel reassured that if they don't like some foods at lunch time, there will be another opportunity to eat soon.
- Food is Not a Reward
 - Using food as a reward can lead to unhealthy eating habits. The practice of rewarding a clean plate with dessert, or rewarding good behavior with a sweet treat can set a child up for valuing food differently.
 - Reward children with time, love, hugs, stories or any other thing that means extra time spent with parents or caregivers.

Note: If parents are concerned that they are experiencing behaviors beyond the scope of typical picky eating, encourage them to follow up with their health care provider.

