



## Ellyn Satter's Guidelines on School Nutrition

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 feel relaxed, comfortable, and behave well around food and at mealtime. They are able to enjoy many foods, try others, and politely turn down still others. They are able to rely on their feelings of hunger and fullness to knowing how much to eat. But 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 unfamiliar way, or *someone they don't know* doing the cooking. But life is full of new situations, and children challenge themselves to meet them. Children work to master new foods and new eating skills, the same as they work to master other skills. Children learn to eat new foods by having them served repeatedly, by seeing their friends eat them, and by tasting them many times—even when they politely spit them out.

Being considerate without catering with menu planning supports children's learning. Children do and dare more when menus pair familiar with unfamiliar food and offer bread or other "fill-up" food.

### 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 have control over whether—and how much—to eat. They need the freedom to turn down food they don't want and the reassurance that they don't have to eat something they have taken. They benefit from knowing they can taste a food and decide not to finish it—or even swallow 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. Teaching children to say "no thank you" and graciously taking no for an answer 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. Children 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 well. 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. A certain amount of waste is inevitable in the school food service setting. But waste goes down as as new foods and unfamiliar ways of preparation become familiar to children.

### Children don't eat food that is unappealing to them

Adults eat food because they enjoy 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 are hungry. And what tastes good one time doesn't another. While attractive and well-prepared food that is generally familiar is important in allowing children to eat well, it doesn't do the whole job. Children have bigger appetites some days than others. They grow faster some times than others. Sometimes even favorite foods don't taste as good.

### 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 food they enjoy eating. They benefit from being taught to turn down food politely, 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 defending against pressure to eat certain amounts or types of food.

### Feeding demands a division of responsibility

The job of the school nutrition staff is to provide a variety of attractive, wholesome food in pleasant surroundings and work with the administration to encourage a positive mealtime environment.

*That's a lot!*

After that, children have to be trusted to eat. They will do it in their own kinky ways, so taken on a day-to-day basis, it can *look* like they aren't doing at all well. But over the long term, children *will* eat, they will learn to behave nicely at mealtime, and they *will* learn to like a variety of food. Putting pressure on children to increase food acceptance or decrease food waste will backfire in all ways. Children eat and do less well, not better, when they are forced, bribed, or coaxed to eat.

For more about feeding, see *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, Kelcy Press, 2008. For more about applying the Division of Responsibility in schools, see <http://bit.ly/13rsMNR>

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