

Identifying nutritional goals and guidance for healthful menu planning research p...

[Family](#), [Children](#)



Identifying Nutritional Goals and Guidance for Healthful Menu Planning

The pivotal role of nutrition, health & safety in determining the “wellness” of children, calls for proactively planning a wholesomely balanced menu that can be offered to them daily, both at home and at school. This requires prior understanding of their special nutritional needs that are mostly age-specific, but also get impacted by factors like activity levels, genetic imprinting, existing ailments etc. However, in the process, the main goal of promoting wellness amongst them should remain undeterred throughout, and in fact, continue to drive such active healthful menu planning efforts. The entire exercise needs to be handled dexterously, making the eating experience, delightful for the developing child, thereby, opening the gates for smooth and healthy future eating interactions between him and the caretaker. Progression from one developmental stage to another changes the child’s nutritional requirements sporadically, necessitating serious menu planning, accordingly, along with setting equally aligned nutritional goals to be attained by that particular menu. For example, the nutritional needs of preschool children, mostly change because of a decrease in their body growth rate due to naturally declining body fat, originally caused by developmental transition from a toddler to a preschooler, triggering unpredictable eating behaviors marked by not only an increasingly volatile appetite, but also emergence of strong likes and dislikes for specific food items, often causing rough and unhealthy eating interactions. These preferences mostly result from the preschoolers’ exploratory nature and linguistic development, exposing them to different food items. Caretakers

need to understand that on a biological level, preschoolers require high-quality diet to support growth and development, due to their high activity levels, thereby, modifying the nutritional goal of planned menu to be, that of providing both ample nutrition, and sufficient calories, required to compensate for their energy spending. Simultaneously, their self-made barrier of food preferences also needs to be broken, to gift them a wellness-filled lifestyle. This is only possible by making eating, a pleasant experience for them by offering foods that are nutritious and visually appealing, while also propagating healthy habits conducive to wellness development. Presence of repulsive, but otherwise healthy foods can be improved by either complimenting them with something that children love to eat or by communicating their importance in promoting their health & well-being, by citing examples of their those strong and healthy friends who got benefitted after consuming them.

Whether done for an infant, toddler or a preschooler, healthy menu planning is both the parents' and teachers' responsibility because young children spend most of their early childhood at both home and school. Planning a healthful menu usually has the following phases:

Phase 1: Understanding both child nutrition and program requirements in terms of the existing nutrition licensing & funding status.

Phase 2: Determining a match between the menu and the nutrition wellness goals, established by the program requirements.

Phase 3: A methodical menu writing and implementation procedure, based on all factors children look for in preferred foods, like flavors, aromas, colors,

textures etc.

Phase 4: Using children's special dietary requirements, regardless of health challenges or cultural differences, as the basis for final menu development.

Both the caretakers need to be aware of the above steps in healthy menu planning, with the onus lying on teachers to effectively communicate the same to the child's family. Teachers can also collaborate with parents in nutritional planning by encouraging their active participation in early childhood care programs organized to provide them with detailed exposure and information regarding developmentally appropriate feeding practices in early childhood settings, be it home or school, and even making them witness such practices being implemented in these programs, thereby, serving as a practical guide for them.

Finally, as per USDA's MyPyramid, a 3- year old preschooler who is active for 30-60 minutes daily, needs 1400 calories per day, to be provided through different meals, with each meal covering the recommended food groups. A sample menu for the same is given below, to be used as a starting guide by parents and teachers for their menu planning efforts:

Daily Food Plan (1400 Calories)

Total Amount for the Day

Grain Group

5 ounces

Vegetable Group

1 1/2 Cups

Fruit Group

1 1/2 Cups

Dairy* Group

2 1/2 Cups

Protein Foods Group

4 Ounces

*Offer your child a fat-free or low fat milk, yogurt & cheese.

Meal & Snack Pattern A (1400 Calorie Daily Food Plan)

Breakfast (1 ounce Grains; 1/2 Cup Fruit; 1/2 Cup Dairy*)

Morning Snack (1 ounce Grains; 1/2 Cup Fruit; 1 ounce Protein Foods)

Lunch (1 ounce Grains; 1/2 Cup Vegetables; 1/2 Cup Fruit; 1/2 Cup Dairy*; 1 ounce Protein Foods)

Afternoon Snack (1/2 Cup Vegetables; 1/2 Cup Dairy*)

Dinner (2 ounces Grains; 1/2 Cup Vegetables; 1 Cup Dairy*; 2 ounce Protein Foods)

Meal & Snack Pattern B (1400 Calorie Daily Food Plan)

Breakfast (1 ounce Grains; 1/2 Cup Dairy*; 1 ounce Protein Foods)

Morning Snack (1/2 Cup Fruit; 1/2 Cup Dairy*)

Lunch (2 ounce Grains; 1/2 Cup Vegetables; 1/2 Cup Fruit; 1/2 Cup Dairy*)

Afternoon Snack (1/2 Cup Vegetables; 1/2 Cup Fruit; 1 ounce Protein Foods)

Dinner (2 ounces Grains; 1/2 Cup Vegetables; 1 Cup Dairy*; 2 ounce Protein Foods)

References

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