

Module Eight: Engaging Children in Healthy Eating*

*Refer to Module Six for ways to engage children in physical activity.

Time: 45 minutes

Goal: To understand the importance of engaging children in healthy eating and to learn how to do so effectively.

Objectives:

- List two reasons why engaging children in healthy eating is important.
- Learn at least three ways to engage children in healthy eating.
- Create one activity that teaches children about healthy eating that also aligns with the Early Learning Foundations (ELFs).

Handouts

- Incorporating Nutrition into the Early Learning Foundations Activity

Additional Materials

- *First Years Toolkit – Administrators’ Guide*
- ELF activity strips

I. Discussion (30 minutes)

Engaging Children in Healthy Eating (title slide):

[Introduce yourself (if you haven’t already done so)].

SAY:

- In this session, you will be learning about the importance of engaging children in healthy eating and how to do so successfully.
- Engaging children is very important. Without the children’s cooperation and enthusiasm, it is challenging to implement the nutrition Rules.
- Just knowing the Rules is the first step, but knowing how to get children excited about healthy eating will help you succeed.

The Importance of Engaging Children in Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (slide 2):

ASK:

- *How many people have difficulties motivating kids to eat healthy foods?*

SAY:

- It can be difficult to motivate kids to make healthy choices and try new foods.
- Early childhood is a critical time for instilling healthy habits. The first five years of a child’s life are extremely formative – kids pick up a tremendous amount of information, attitudes, beliefs, habits and behaviors during this time. As child care providers, you spend many hours with these kids. You play a very important role in ensuring that kids develop healthy habits from an early age – this is a big responsibility!
- It is important to teach children healthy habits starting at an early age because changing habits is much harder as a child ages.

ASK:

- *How many of you have tried to change a health behavior in adulthood (e.g., quit smoking, exercise more, eat more fruits and vegetables)? It's hard isn't it?*

SAY:

- Old habits die hard, so it is very beneficial for kids not to adopt unhealthy habits in the first place.
- Telling kids that fruits and vegetables are good for them is often not enough – you must show them that fruits and vegetables are delicious and fun, and get them excited about eating healthy foods. This means modeling positive behavior and establishing healthy habits as a way of life, not just something they have to do while in child care.

Learning Objectives (slide 3)

[READ slide.]

But How Do You Do It? (slide 4)

SAY:

- So now we've established that engaging children in healthy eating is very important. But, how do you do it?
- Children can be picky eaters, which creates challenges at mealtime. With this in mind, we've put together a number of simple, practical ways to overcome some of the barriers that you might be facing at your child care facility.
- We hope that these ideas will be useful to you and that you'll share some of the things that have worked for you in the past.
- If you have questions or comments throughout this presentation, please speak up, and as a group we may be able to come up with some creative solutions.

#1 Create Healthy, Positive Mealtime Environments (slide 5)

SAY:

- One of the easiest ways to make sure that kids are engaged in eating a healthy meal is to create a positive mealtime environment that is calm and organized. Some ways to do this are to:

[READ slide.]

SAY:

- Kids thrive when they have a consistent routine and know what to expect from their day. Much like adults, they are comforted by knowing what time they will eat and where. Especially when introducing a new food, a reliable mealtime routine can provide the structure which allows kids to feel safe enough to try a new food. You should make an effort to keep mealtime fairly consistent for the children in your care. This might mean:
 - Eating at the same time each day
 - Washing hands before and after a meal
 - Assigning a seat to each child
 - Assigning simple pre/post-meal duties to each child age 2+
 - Singing a song or saying a blessing before the meal
 - Or integrating other activities into your mealtime routine that you find children benefit from and enjoy

- At mealtime, children should focus exclusively on the food they are eating and the mealtime conversation at the table. This means that tables on which food is served should be free from toys, arts and craft supplies, and other items.
- The TV should never be on during mealtime, and background music should be calm and kept very soft. Children will always direct their attention to the most interesting thing in the room – you want this to be the food you’re serving and not what is on TV. If children are distracted, they are likely to ignore their hunger cues and eat mindlessly, leading to over- or under-eating.
- Children should be encouraged to experience the meal with all of their senses (sight, smell, sound, etc.) and engage in conversation with teachers and their peers about the food they are consuming as well as related topics about the day.

ASK:

- *What is a suitable amount of time to give the average preschool-age child for a meal?*

[Answer: 20–30 minutes is a suitable time frame for a normally-developing child to eat a meal. If given longer than 30 minutes, children are likely to become sidetracked.]

SAY:

- Children AND staff should have enough room at the table to pass food around, reach for things, and use utensils without feeling cramped for space, etc.
- As with adults, children need to perceive a meal as attractive in order to want to eat it. Children can be especially critical when confronted with new and unfamiliar foods.

SPECIAL NOTE

Children with developmental delays or nutritional issues may need additional time to finish a meal.

Food Presentation (slides 6 and 7)

SAY:

- The following are some ideas for presenting food in a manner that is attractive to kids.

[READ slide.]

[Show pictures of sample food presentation on slide 7.]

(slide 8)

SAY:

- Here are some more ideas for engaging kids in healthy eating.

[READ slide.]

ASK:

- *Does anyone here use the “family-style” approach to mealtime at their child care facility? Can you tell me what that looks like?*

SAY:

- “Family-style” is when everyone sits down at the table together to eat a meal. Food is put in bowls or on plates in the center of the table and children/adults can serve themselves. This approach is beneficial because:
 - It encourages conversation.
 - Children develop motor skills by serving themselves.
 - Children are the ones that put the food on their plates, not the teacher. As a result, kids take ownership of the food and eat the food that’s available.

- Children should always be seated at a table during meals and snacks. They should sit at child-size tables or at normal-sized tables with booster seats. Children should be seated comfortably with their bottoms on the chair – not sitting on their feet or ankles for additional height. When seated, children’s hips, knees and ankles should be at 90° with their feet resting on the floor or other solid support.
- Children should be given eating utensils that align with their development and abilities. This might mean that some children are using sippy cups, while others have graduated to regular cups or glasses. Children should be continually challenged and encouraged to be independent at mealtime.
- Children should have access to water during snack and mealtime in the event that they finish their milk/juice and are still thirsty.

SPECIAL NOTE

Be sure to put pre-measured serving utensils in serving dishes to monitor how much children are eating! Children should be closely supervised when serving themselves and those who are sick should not be allowed to serve themselves from communal dishes due to the risk of spreading germs to others.

Slide 9 (Example)

SAY:

- This is an example of a positive mealtime environment.

[Allow time for participants to analyze picture.]

ASK:

- *What makes this an ideal mealtime environment?*

[Answer: Teacher sitting with children; table is free of toys and other non-food items; children are seated at appropriately-sizes tables and chairs; etc.]

Slide 10 (Example)

SAY:

- This is an example of a negative mealtime environment.

[Allow time for participants to analyze picture.]

ASK:

- *What makes this a less than ideal mealtime environment?*

[Answers: Child is not at table; child doesn’t have plate; child has toy in hand; child is lying on his back = choking hazard; child is too big for bouncy seat; etc.]

SAY:

- It is important for all children to learn proper behavior around snack and mealtimes. Even if the child is just having an impromptu snack, he needs to wash his hands, sit at the table, use a plate, etc. It is never too early to educate children on proper behaviors and gently correct inappropriate conduct such as that captured in this photograph.

Motivating Picky Eaters (slide 11)

ASK:

- *How many of you have struggled with or are currently struggling with a child who is a picky eater?*

SAY:

- Motivating young children to eat a variety of healthy foods can be a struggle for parents and child care providers alike. Let's take a look at some simple suggestions to overcoming picky eating.

[READ slide.]

SAY:

- Getting kids to try and actually like a new food takes a lot of patience and creativity. For example, if you serve scrambled eggs for breakfast and a child does not like them, try them again a few days later for lunch. You can also try to prepare eggs differently – fried, hard-boiled or in egg salad. It's also a good idea to serve a new food after a holiday or other break. When kids return to child care after a few days off, everything is new, so kids are less likely to notice when you serve an unfamiliar food.
- Getting children accustomed to new foods takes time, so a gradual approach is more likely to work than one that happens overnight. For example, kids will probably notice if you switch from whole milk to fat-free from one day to the next. However, if you first switch to 1% (low-fat) and then to fat-free, kids are less likely to notice and complain.
- The “two-bite” policy encourages children to take at least two small bites of a new food. Once kids have had two bites, they can decide whether they like it or not. If they decide that they don't like it, they can say “no, thank you” and should not be pressured to continue eating.
- There are many ways to subtly include healthy ingredients into foods that kids already like. For example, many kids do not like the texture of cooked vegetables. A great way to get around this aversion is to blend vegetables into a tomato sauce served over spaghetti. Cauliflower is also easy to mix into mashed potatoes. While this is not a permanent solution, it allows kids to slowly grow accustomed to the taste of certain foods.
- Remember – Your job as a child care provider is to provide healthy meals that align with the DE CACFP/*Delacare* Rules. The child's job is to make the decision of whether or not to eat.
- Parent involvement is essential in engaging children who are picky eaters – you should periodically sit down with parents and discuss what the child is eating and any issues you have observed. Together, you and the child's parent(s) can come up with the best plan for getting the child to eat a healthy diet that provides all the necessary nutrients for healthy growth and development.
- Don't forget – positive reinforcement goes a long way! If a child tries a new food, reward him/her with praise, a note home to parents(s)/guardian(s), a sticker or other small prize, his/her name or photo displayed on a bulletin board or a special song.

ASK:

- *Does anyone have other ideas on ways to motivate picky eaters? Would anyone like to share a success story or a particularly challenging case?*

[Encourage idea sharing and discussion for no more than five minutes. If participants get stuck on negative experiences, prompt discussion of what they learned in this training that can be tried.]

Modeling Positive Behavior (slide 12)

SAY:

- Another important element for engaging children in healthy eating is modeling positive behaviors regarding your food choices. The children in your care spend a significant portion of their day with you and look to you for guidance. You play a very important role in teaching children positive behaviors and habits through the way you act, the decisions you make and the things that you say. To be a positive role model for children as they develop attitudes and behaviors related to healthy food choices you should:

[READ slide.]

#2 Involve Children (slide 13 and 14)

SAY:

- A great way to engage kids in healthy eating is to get them involved with food and mealtime in a variety of ways. Involving children in meal preparation helps teach fine motor and life skills. It encourages independence and motivates kids to take ownership of the meal. Children as young as age two can be involved in meal preparation. They can:

[READ slide 13.]

SAY:

- It's important to remember that children should never be in the kitchen while meals are being cooked due to the dangers associated with hot stovetops/ovens, sharp knives and other potentially dangerous items. When involving kids in meal preparation, always be sure to supervise them closely and intervene when necessary. Children who appear to be sick should not assist in meal preparation. Even children who are well should always wash their hands prior to handling food and wear gloves if possible.
- You can also involve kids in decision making or in hands-on activities. Many children are tactile or kinesthetic learners, meaning they learn by touching or doing rather than seeing or hearing. Getting these children involved through hands-on activities is a great way to teach healthy habits to these types of learners.

[Read slide 14.]

SAY:

- Even young children enjoy the opportunity to make decisions. When possible, ask the children for their input (e.g., what vegetable to prepare, what plates to use, whether to have a picnic outside or eat indoors, etc.).
- Allowing kids to “get their hands dirty” while planting a garden is a great learning experience. Kids learn where food comes from and how a seed grows in the ground. This is a wonderful teachable moment that provides children with a greater understanding of their environment and the world around them and also teaches life skills.

#3 Communicate! (slide 15)

SAY:

- Talking to kids is very important in instilling healthy attitudes and behaviors. You and/or your staff should:

[Read slide.]

SAY:

- Kids should learn to “listen” to their bodies and pick up on hunger and fullness cues. They should learn to eat when they are hungry and stop eating when they feel full. Before a meal, it’s always good to ask kids how hungry they are and pay attention to how their bellies are feeling throughout the meal. Kids should be actively engaged in mealtime and not eating mindlessly.
- Many children do not know where their food comes from. During mealtime, and especially when introducing new foods, make a little lesson out of what kids are eating. Explain to them where and how fruits and vegetables grow, where milk comes from, and how bread is made from wheat and other whole grains.
- Encourage kids to talk among each other about their eating experience. Especially when trying a new food, ask kids to tell you and their peers how it looks, smells, tastes, feels, etc. This teaches new vocabulary and expression.
- Encourage kids to motivate each other and compliment their peers when they try a new food or make a healthy choice. Even at a young age, peer influence is stronger than you may think!
- Again – always be sure to praise children, both one-on-one and publically.

#4 Incorporate Health Everywhere (slide 16)

SAY:

- It’s easy to incorporate health into many of the activities and lessons that you teach throughout the day. Using fruits, vegetables and other healthy ingredients, you can teach shapes, colors, math, science, art and other important topics and developmental areas.
- You can use bananas, kiwis, carrots and strawberries to teach the colors yellow, brown, green, orange and red. You can also use fruits and vegetables as visual aides to teach descriptive words such as round, oblong, sphere, etc.
- Use fruits, veggies, crackers or other food items to teach simple mathematic concepts such as addition and subtraction (If you have five apples and you take one away, how many are left?)
- Doing a taste test is a great way to expand children’s vocabularies. Have each child try a little bite of a lemon or lime and teach them the words “sour” and “tart.” Fruits and vegetables provide wonderful opportunities to use words like “sticky,” “crunchy,” “prickly” and more.
- There are many children’s books about healthy eating – visit your local library and check some out for the kids at your child care center or home.
- On occasion, use ingredients like pasta or rice to make jewelry or musical instruments (i.e., maracas or “shakers”). Kids can also trace food to make pictures or use pieces of food as stamps. Be careful not to use food for play too often – children should learn that food is a commodity that should not be wasted.
- There is so much to learn about food. Take kids on a supermarket tour, let them pick fruit at a local orchard or take them to a farm and let them milk a cow.

II. Activity (15 minutes)

SAY:

- Up to this point, you’ve learned about fun and creative ways to motivate kids to make healthy choices and engage even picky eaters in trying new foods. Healthy habits are not only good for children’s physical development, but lessons and activities about healthy habits can also teach essential developmental skills. Let’s take a look at the Early Learning Foundations (ELFs) and how learning about healthy eating fits in.

Overview of the Early Learning Foundations (slides 17 – 19)

ASK:

- *Can anyone explain to the group what the Early Learning Foundations are?*

SAY:

- The ELFs are a curriculum guide for daily and monthly planning that are linked to the skills that children are expected to develop for success in kindergarten and beyond.
- They help early childhood professionals plan meaningful activities that are developmentally-appropriate, educational, and challenge children to progress and attain important skills.
- There are eight domains for preschoolers and four for infants/toddlers.

[Read ELFs on slide 19 – those with asterisks also apply to infants/toddlers.]

Activity (slide 20)

SAY:

- Your handout, “Incorporating Nutrition into the Early Learning Foundations,” summarizes the eight Preschool ELF domains. You will use this handout for the activity to follow.
- You are going to work in groups to put together an activity that teaches children about nutrition and that also aligns with age-appropriate skill expectations outlined in the Preschool ELFs.

[Go to each table with an envelope containing ELF activity strips. Have a representative from each table pick two pieces of paper from the envelope. Each piece of paper will have written on it an item that can be found in most child care facilities (e.g., measuring cups, books, play kitchen, dry ingredients like pasta or beans, etc.)]

SAY:

- Using the materials you selected from the envelope, work together with the people at your table to create an activity that engages children in learning about nutrition.
- Your activity should be designed with preschoolers in mind.
- As you put together your activity, pay special attention to the ELF handout and be sure that the activity aligns with at least one Preschool ELF domain.
- You do not have to use both items selected from the envelope. You can feel free to add materials if necessary (e.g., if given crayons and pieces of fake fruit, you may add construction paper so the kids can trace the fruit onto the paper using the crayons).
- After 5 – 10 minutes, please select one person to present your table’s activity to the group.

SAY:

- At this point I’d like one representative from each group to share their table’s activity with the group. Please stand up and tell us:
 - Your name
 - What materials you picked from the envelope
 - What activity you came up with
 - And which ELF domains the activity aligns with

[Collect the strips of paper and return them to envelope.]

SAY:

- Thank you for sharing your wonderful ideas!
- As you can see, it is very easy to create meaningful activities that teach kids about healthy habits using inexpensive, basic materials that most child care facilities already have on hand. In addition, these types of activities are a very simple way to teach children skills (social interaction, creative expression, math, science, etc.) that they will need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.
- This concludes the presentation. Thank you for your attention. I hope that you walk away with a better understanding of how important it is to engage children in healthy eating and teach them healthy habits from an early age. I also hope that you will use some of the ideas and suggestions presented by myself and your fellow participants at your child care center or home going forward.

Incorporating Nutrition into the Early Learning Foundations (ELFs)

Using the materials given to your group, create an activity for the preschool-age children at your center or daycare home. As you create your activity, make an effort to align it with three ELFs. Briefly describe your activity, then indicate which ELFs it corresponds with and why. Finally, share your ideas with the group!

DOMAIN	DESCRIPTION
Emotional and Social Development	Supporting the development of social and emotional skills through understanding of self concept, self regulation, relationships and cooperation.
Approaches to Learning	Creating a learning environment that supports individual children’s learning differences while encouraging children to take initiatives, try new things, show persistence and problem solve.
Language and Literacy	Fostering the development of language skills, including receptive and expressive communication, emergent reading and emergent writing.
Math	Encouraging children’s critical thinking skills through open-ended questions to develop concept knowledge in number and operations, geometry and spatial relationships, patterns, measurement and data analysis.
Science	Promoting children’s sense of wonder, curiosity and development of scientific knowledge and reasoning skills through making observations, asking questions, drawing conclusions and using tools to extend their investigations.
Creative Expression	Fostering creativity through music, movement and dance, visual arts and dramatic play.
My Family, My Community, My World	Cultivating an understanding of culture, history, geography, government, communities and economics to prepare them for success in their community as well as in a multi-cultural world.
Physical Development and Health	Continuing development of fine and gross motor skills and healthy behaviors to provide a foundation for lifelong well being and successful exploration of the other domains of early learning.

ELF Activity Strips

Instructions: Photocopy this page and cut into strips. Place strips in an envelope and use for the Early Learning Foundations Activity.

Book about healthy eating (e.g., *Alphabet Soup*, *Growing Vegetable Soup*, *A Story About Raisins*)

Dry ingredients (e.g., beans, rice, pasta)

Measuring cups and/or spoons

Play kitchen

Pieces of fruit (real or fake; whole or in pieces)

Crayons, colored pencils, paint, chalk

CD player

Magazines

Gardening supplies
(e.g., seeds, watering can, shovels)

