What Your Child Really Needs

The first thing a parent should ask is: What is the appropriate diet for my child?

The recommended diet for a child is:

- Fruits and Vegetables: 4-5 servings
- Milk and Dairy products: 2-3 servings
- Breads and Cereals: 5 servings
- Meat and Meat alternatives: 2 servings

Division of Responsibility

Your Job: Responsible for what, when, and where your child eats. Provide appealing, wholesome food in a pleasant atmosphere.

Your Child’s Job: Deciding what to eat and how much. Trust your child. You want your child to develop internal cues so they know when they’re done eating. Young children are actually better at knowing how much they need to eat. When we get older is when we create bad eating habits, like eating out of boredom, or overeating because we feel a need to clear our plate (Satter, 2014).

Offer Control

Offer structured choices, but avoid giving too many choices. Limit choices to two so as to avoid overwhelming your child.

If you have a child with Autism, you may want to seek help from a registered dietitian, speech and language pathologist, and an occupational therapist. They can help you plan a nutritious diet, determine if a medical problem may be making eating difficult for him/her, and they can teach your child feeding and eating skills.

Tips for Feeding Your Picky Eater

A Parent’s Guide for Autistic Children

Included in the back are activities for kids!

Kaylin Stephens
Keep portion sizes small. Once (s)he finish what’s on the plate, (s)he can ask for more. Large portions can be overwhelming; finishing small portions gives a sense of accomplishment.

**Meal Times**

Experts recommend serving **three meals daily** and **two to three snacks**. Try not to provide food and beverages (besides water) whenever the child wants it.

It may seem like your child is **unable to sit at the table during mealtime**. Some parents have found the following tips helpful:

1. Exercise before mealtime.
2. Set a timer. Children with autism can benefit from defined expectations. They’ll be expected to remain seated until the timer goes off.
3. Allow her/him to do a quiet activity while waiting for others to eat their food.
4. Plan an after-dinner activity.

**Keep mealtime pleasant.** Relax and do not let food become a conflict. Pushing your child to eat gives him/her negative attention and increases pickiness.

**Keep food “neutral.”** It should not be used as a bribe. They also should never be expected to eat to please you.

Try not to obsess over **food jag**s. A food jag is when a child will only eat one food item every meal.

**Don’t be a short order cook.** Don’t provide quickly prepared meals upon your child’s request. You give them options and they can choose how much to eat.

Introduce new foods that are most similar to foods that your child already enjoys (“Autistic child: Tips,” 2013).

**Introducing New Foods**

Make a plan to expose the new food one or two times daily for two to three weeks. It’s even more effective when you or another child is enjoying the new food. Start by placing the food on the table. Eventually you can put it on their plate, but don’t make them eat it. Talk about how yummy it is. If they are especially picky, you can make it a process. Tell them they don’t have to eat it, but you are going to put it on their plate. The next day they’ll need to touch the food, soon they’ll have to taste it but they don’t have to swallow. Then eventually they’ll be expected to have a bite. Continue to introduce new food this way.
Find patterns of what your child will eat: texture, taste, temperature, time of day, etc. Some parents find that their child generally will eat certain foods as long as it has a dressing or sauce on it. Some children with autism avoid especially aromatic foods or foods of a certain color ("Autistic child: Tips," 2013).

Get them involved! Let him/her help when preparing food. Go grocery shopping together. Cook and serve food together. Find simple tasks to help your child get involved. A garden can be a fun way to do this and also to expose new foods as well.

If you’re making a favorite dinner, such as pasta, you can ask them to pick a mystery ingredient for the other family members to discover during the meal. They can decide what the ingredient will be: corn, broccoli, or chicken.

The more familiar your child is with a food, the more likely they are to try it and eventually like it. But it’s a process. A great time to introduce a new food is when the child is most hungry. You can build their curiosity by cutting the foods into small, fun shapes. They can use vegetables to make a face in their pizza, use cookie cutters to cut their sandwiches.
As you are making it, let them see you eating and enjoying the food. Children with autism are often **hypersensitive to textures**. It might not be the flavor they don’t like but how it feels in their mouth. They might not like a plain squishy tomato, but they may like it if it’s blended into salsa or pasta sauce.

During mealtime people around the table can talk about the new food and about how much they enjoy it. You will want to lead by example. **The child will be learning their eating habits from you**, so make healthy choices ("Seven," 2013).

The following pages include activities for your child. The more familiar your child is with different food, the more likely they are to eat it.

---

**Fruits and Vegetables Exercises for Kids**

The following exercises are great ways to teach children about fruits and vegetables.

**Exercise #1: Growing vegetables**

Fruits and vegetables can grow three ways:

- On vines
- On a tree
- In the ground

Guess how the following fruits grow:

1. Bananas
   - a. On vines
   - b. On a tree
   - c. In the ground

2. Strawberries
   - a. On vines
   - b. On a tree
   - c. In the ground

3. Lemons
   - a. On vines
   - b. On a tree
   - c. In the ground

4. Carrots
   - a. On vines
   - b. On a tree
   - c. In the ground

5. Tomatoes
   - a. On vines
   - b. On a tree
   - c. In the ground
Exercise #2: Vegetable or fruit?

A fruit contains one or more seeds. Many of the foods that we refer to as vegetables are actually fruits. Circle “vegetable” or “fruit” for each of the following foods:

1. Peach
   a. Vegetable
   b. Fruit
2. Celery
   a. Vegetable
   b. Fruit
3. Tomato
   a. Vegetable
   b. Fruit
4. Cabbage
   a. Vegetable
   b. Fruit
5. Apple
   a. Vegetable
   b. Fruit
6. Pepper
   a. Vegetable
   b. Fruit
7. Pear
   a. Vegetable
   b. Fruit
8. Eggplant
   a. Vegetable
   b. Fruit

Exercise #3: Citrus fruit

Fruits called citrus are very high in vitamin C. Vitamin C is important for your health. Before people found out how important vitamin C is for us, many sailors got sick with a disease called scurvy. Once the sailors started to eat more citrus and to drink more juices from citrus fruits, they stopped getting sick.

Citrus fruits have a thick skin, called a rind, which can be peeled off using your fingers. They have a strong, pleasant smell and a tangy taste. Citrus fruits grow on trees and shrubs in hot, tropical climates.

Circle the fruits below that you think are citrus fruits.

- Plums
- Watermelon
- Lemons
- Grapes
- Limes
- Peppers
- Oranges
- Bananas
- Dates
- Raspberries
- Apples
- Grapefruit
- Figs
- Cherries
- Nectarines
- Pears
- Apricots
- Cantaloupe
**Exercise #4: Plant parts that we eat**

We eat all different kinds of plants. Here is a look at some of these parts.

**Leaves**—an outgrowth of a plant that grows from the stem. The main function of leaves is to change the energy from the sun into food for the plant through a process called “photosynthesis.”

Example: Lettuce

**Roots**—the part of the plant that gets food and water from the soil, stores energy, and provides support for the plant. Most roots grow underground and have no leaves or buds.

Example: Carrots

**Seeds**—part of a plant that will grow into a new plant. Found in the fruit.

Example: Peas

**Tubers**—a fleshy, swollen part of a root or an underground stem.

Example: White potatoes

**Fruits**—edible part of the plant, usually fleshy and containing seeds.

Example: Apple

**Pods**—a long narrow case that sometimes holds the seeds of a plant.

Example: Snow peas

**Flowers**—the colored, sometimes scented part of a plant.

Example: Broccoli
Put the following foods under the correct plant part column:

- Cabbage
- Green beans
- Artichokes
- Beets
- Kidney beans
- Yams
- Cherries
- Oranges
- Radishes
- Spinach
- Asparagus
- Corn
- Blueberries
- Celery
- Chili peppers
- Brussels sprouts
- Pumpkin
- Cauliflower

Exercise #5: Colorful fruits and vegetables

All fruits and vegetables are good for us, but different kinds are good for us in different ways. Scientists have found that vegetables and fruits from the same color family have much in common with each other. For instance, most orange-colored fruits and vegetables, such as carrots and apricots, contain a lot of vitamin A. Vitamin A is important for our vision, especially to help us see in the dark. Vitamin A also makes our skin healthy. Think about your favorite fruits and vegetables. Which color do you like the most?

Put a check in the box next to the fruits and vegetables that you like the most. Try to think of one example from each color that is not already listed and write it on the blank line. Then fill in the blanks for the statements at the bottom of the page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fruit</th>
<th>Flowers</th>
<th>Leaves</th>
<th>Roots</th>
<th>Seeds</th>
<th>Pods</th>
<th>Stems</th>
<th>Tubers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue and purple:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Blackberries
- Blueberries
- Plums
- Purple grapes
- Eggplant
- Raisins

Blackberries

Blueberries

Plums

Purple grapes

Eggplant

Raisins
Green:
- Avocados
- Green apples
- Green grapes
- Honeydew
- Lettuce
- Green peppers
- ________________________________

White:
- Bananas
- Cauliflower
- Onion
- Brown pears
- Mushrooms
- Potatoes
- ________________________________

Yellow/orange:
- Cantaloupe
- Oranges
- Peaches
- Carrots
- Corn
- Pumpkin
- ________________________________

Red:
- Apples
- Strawberries
- Watermelon
- Tomatoes
- Red peppers
- Beets
- ________________________________

I eat more __________________ fruits and vegetables.
(color)

I eat fewer __________________ fruits and vegetables.
(color)

To try to eat more colors of fruits and vegetables.
I will try to have more __________________,
______________________, and ____________________.
(Write down three fruits and/or vegetables.)

(“Fruits and vegetables,” 2013)
Coloring Book

(Miller, 2014)
ANSWERS

Answers for Exercise 1

1. b. Bananas grow on a tree.
2. a. Strawberries grow on vines.
3. b. Lemons grow on a tree.
4. c. Carrots grow in the ground.
5. a. Tomatoes grow on vines.

Answers for Exercise 2

1. b. A peach is a fruit.
2. a. Celery is a vegetable.
3. b. A tomato is a fruit.
4. a. A cabbage is a vegetable.
5. b. An apple is a fruit.
6. b. A pepper is a fruit.
7. b. A pear is a fruit.
8. b. An eggplant is a fruit.

Answers for Exercise 3

• Oranges
• Limes
• Lemons
• Grapefruits

Answers for Exercise 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fruits</th>
<th>Cherries, Oranges, Blueberries, Pumpkin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flower</td>
<td>Artichokes, Cauliflower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaves</td>
<td>Cabbage, Spinach, Brussels, Sprouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roots</td>
<td>Beets, Radishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeds</td>
<td>Kidney beans, Corn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pods</td>
<td>Green beans, Chilli peppers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stems</td>
<td>Asparagus, Celery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tubers</td>
<td>Yams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

("Fruits and vegetable," 2013)

Work Cited


