



## **Prevention Series: Considering Fitness and Nutrition in Choosing a Day Care**

**[ED. NOTE:** One good way to reach employee-parents with important news about preventing childhood obesity is to send them this article or post it to your intranet. There is a plethora of materials about choosing a reputable and safe day care, but very little about how to choose a health-conscious facility or provider.]

If you have a child in day care, no doubt the decision about who would provide that care was one you took very, very seriously. You thought about safety, cleanliness, comfort, personal attention, activities, supervision...but did you remember to ask about how your child's fitness and nutritional needs would be met? Many parents don't.

An alarming number of today's children are overweight or obese because good nutrition and healthy exercise weren't encouraged from the earliest possible age.

### **Fitness**

Even very young children can eat too much and exercise too little. Children need to be fit, strong and flexible. You and your day care provider can help your child develop great fitness skills for life by offering activities that are developmentally appropriate. As your child gets older, skills should build on one another by providing opportunities for locomotor activity (large movement skills); stability activity; manipulative activity (small movement skills); and rhythm activity.

You can easily encourage your child's emerging motor skills at home. Encourage your day care providers to do so as well.

- **Running.** Toddlers should be given opportunities for running outside: playing tag, racing and so on.
- **Kicking.** Toddlers love kicking balls. Beach balls and soft playground balls are good choices.
- **Dancing.** From babyhood on up, play CDs with lively tunes and encourage movement and dance.
- **Throwing.** Children begin to practice throwing from their high chairs. Tossing a cracker overboard means your child is practicing throwing while learning cause and effect. Rolled-up socks, yarn balls, small stuffed animals, or beanbags can be safely tossed indoors.
- **Pounding, holding and manipulating:** Shape sorters and pop-up toys with lots of large, safe pieces to operate are ideal for toddlers. Objects with different sizes, weights and parts — like pots, pans and lids, measuring cups, or plastic storage containers — require different kinds of hand movements, which help develop fine motor skills.



## **Nutrition**

The American Dietetic Association, the USDA, the American Public Health Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Society for Nutrition Education have agreed upon nutritional standards for child-care providers. Experts from these organizations recommend that children who are in day care between four and seven hours per day should receive food that equals about one-third of their nutritional needs. Children who are at day care for eight or more hours should have one-half to two-thirds of their nutritional needs met (about one meal and two snacks). Meals and snacks should meet minimum requirements:

- **Breakfast** should consist of milk, fruit, vegetable or 100 percent juice, bread or cereal.
- **Lunch or supper** should include: milk, meat or meat alternate, fruit or vegetable (two servings), bread or alternate (such as rice, pasta or crackers).
- **Snacks** should include at least two of the four components, milk, meat or alternate, fruit or vegetable, bread or alternate.

Meals and snacks should focus on whole grains, *fresh* fruits and vegetables, with smaller amounts of meat or meat alternatives and dairy. As many foods as possible should be fresh and unprocessed.

A recent evaluation of day-care meals showed that the combination of foods and the quantity of foods served failed to supply the recommended amount of many vitamins and minerals. Ask if the program at your child's day care is under the guidance of a registered dietitian who regularly checks to ensure that meals and snacks meet dietary guidelines.

Following are some tips that may help in reviewing the mealtime practices a day care facility:

- Ask to see a weekly menu and review it for variety. A wide variety will help your child learn to like a wide range of foods.
- Make sure most foods have minimal added sugar, salt or fat.
- Do not allow your child to have foods that contain nitrates (e.g., hot dogs, some cold cuts); foods with caffeine; high-salt foods such as chips; high calorie drinks like sodas, fruit drinks, or candy.
- Check to see that beverages are nutritious. Apple juice is low in nutrients, as are many other 100 percent juices. Request more nutritious beverages such as orange juice, milk, or fortified soy milk.



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- The foods served should be age appropriate in type *and* amount.
- Ask for menus in advance so you can plan home meals to compliment what is being served. For example, if only one fruit and no vegetables were served, plan a meal that includes vegetables. If juice rather than milk was served, offer plenty of milk or other calcium-rich beverages at home.
- Be sure that meals and snacks are served at intervals of not more than three hours and that caregivers sit at the table with the children and eat the same foods. Additionally, furniture and eating utensils should be age appropriate and mealtimes should be relaxed and unhurried.

If the day-care facility you choose does not meet these requirements, but providers appear eager to comply, you may have a chance to help design an environment that will help provide healthy eating habits and fitness behaviors to last a lifetime. For more helpful information about choosing the day care that's right for your child, visit:

- [www.childcareaware.org](http://www.childcareaware.org)
- [www.nncc.org](http://www.nncc.org) (National Network for Child Care)