



## Encouraging Preschoolers to Try New Foods

Laura Bellows and Jennifer Anderson

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**MANY CHILDREN ARE NATURALLY PICKY EATERS.** Teachers and caregivers can help children overcome their picky eating by allowing them to explore and taste new foods. With the rise in childhood overweight, it is important that we establish healthful eating habits early in life. One way to do this is to encourage young children to try new foods. The preschool years are a critical time to introduce and encourage healthy nutrition because early exposure to healthful foods helps children establish good eating habits that carry into adulthood (Birch 1998).

Unfortunately, the diets of most young children are poor or need improvement. Children's diets typically mirror the deficiencies of their parents' diets—high in fat, sodium, and sugar and low in fiber. In a *Nutrition Insights* report (USDA 2001), only 36 percent of two- to three-year-olds were noted as having a good diet, and this percentage decreased with increasing age. Much of the decline in diet quality for children occurred between the two- to three-year-old age groups and the four- to six-year-old groups, falling from 36 to 17 percent.

Children establish food preferences and dietary habits during the first six years of life (Birch 1998). It is essential to introduce a variety of foods to children at an early age. Preschool-age children go through a normal developmental phase called *neophobia*, or fear of new things—in this case, new foods. Many adults refer to this stage as “picky eating.” But consistently offering a variety of foods to preschoolers helps the majority of children overcome the natural tendency to reject new foods and leads to more healthful eating habits (Birch 1979).

Children's eating behaviors, food preferences, and willingness to try new foods are influenced by the people around them. Parents and other caregivers influence children's eating practices in several ways. They control availability and accessibility of foods, determine how and when meals are served, model eating behaviors, and establish good manners and etiquette around food (Ray & Klesges 1993; Nicklas et al. 2001). Thus, it is important to educate teachers about nutrition and share practical strategies for encouraging preschoolers to try new foods.

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## Making new foods fun

In response to concerns about children's eating behaviors, the Colorado Nutrition Network developed and tested Food Friends—Making New Foods Fun for Kids. We designed the program as a 12-week social marketing campaign aimed at encouraging preschool-age children to try new foods, such as Ugli Fruit, couscous, and daikon radish. The length of the program was critical, we believed. From literature reviews and evaluation data from the Network's Food Friends pilot, we confirmed that 8 to 12 experiences are necessary for a child to try and then accept a new food (Johnson et al. in press). Based on this review, we established a 12-week time frame.

In the classroom portion of Food Friends, children participate in a 15- to 20-minute nutrition activity once a week, read storybooks that support the Try New Foods theme once a week, and have opportunities to sample new foods twice a week (Young et al. 2003, 2004). A bilingual parent component includes educational handouts, activities, and materials encouraging parents to offer new foods at home (Bellows, Cole, & Anderson in press).

Various strategies bring Food Friends to life for children in interesting, playful ways. The child-centered activities and supporting materials focus on seven food characters and 13 novel foods. In the program, Ollie Orange, Tina Tortilla, Marty Milk, Howie Hamburger, and Corrine Carrot introduce their new friends Gertie Gouda and Rudy D. Radish to the class.

Children learn while playing with the Food Friends materials. A classroom kit, packaged in a bin, includes puppets, puzzles, memory card games, activity flash cards, and drawing pads. Other classroom resources include placemats, containers of beans, paper plates, a class poster, a brown paper bag, and storybooks. Teachers read the food-themed storybooks throughout the program.

Tasting novel foods is built into all 12 weeks of programming because, for preschoolers, familiarity leads to preference and thus to intake. Foods chosen for Food Friends are based on the responses to food frequency questionnaires completed by a sample of parents of three- to five-year-olds in Colorado families with low incomes (Young et al. 2004). A novel food was defined as any food that 85 percent or more of parents indicated their child had tried four or fewer times in his or her childhood. Other factors such as seasonality, availability, potential as a choking hazard, ease of preparation, and cost or reimbursement paid through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) influenced selections. To introduce new foods, teachers use strategies emphasized through the program. They follow the Seven Simple Tips, which include:

**F**or preschoolers, familiarity leads to preference and thus to intake.

- Make food fun
- Keep offering new foods
- Be a good role model by eating new foods with children
- Let children choose new foods
- Help children learn about new foods
- Try offering one new food at a time
- Avoid forcing children to try new foods



## Food Friends teacher training

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Prior to classroom implementation of the Food Friends program, teachers attend a two-hour workshop at their center. They receive training on using the materials and understanding food concepts and child feeding issues. They discuss topics such as neophobia, developmental characteristics of three- to five-year olds in feeding, role modeling, how to encourage children to try new foods, and the Seven Simple Tips. The training, modeling, and program materials work synergistically to establish positive environments in which children can experience and try new foods.

## Summary

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Several assessments of the success of the Food Friends program document changes in young children's behavior (Stephenson 2005; Toombs 2005; Johnson et al. in press). The strategies applied in Food Friends can be used by

teachers, caregivers, and parents in a wide range of settings to encourage children to try new foods.

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