

# Healthy eating and play for kindergarten children (3–5 years)

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Children’s habits are not only influenced by family life, but also by other children and messages from television. Children can learn to make healthy food, activity and lifestyle choices if given help from families and carers.

## Eating patterns

Once children start kindergarten, life takes on a new routine. A regular intake of food is needed throughout the day to help keep children active and able to concentrate while learning. Offer regular meals and snacks, and allow your child to eat according to appetite without force or arguments.

Kindergarten children need a range of foods from the following groups:

- fruits and vegetables
- breads and cereals
- meat, fish, chicken, eggs, legumes
- milk, cheese and yoghurt.

## Growth

Children grow at a steady rate during the kindergarten years. Low fat or restricted diets are not recommended because children’s energy and nutrient needs are high. For parents who are concerned about excessive weight gain, a good approach is to:

- develop healthy eating habits for the whole family
- encourage regular activity – aim for at least one hour and up to several hours of play per day.

## Appetite

Kindergarten children can usually sense how much food their bodies need and will eat enough to match this – but they can lose this natural ability if forced to eat. Encouraging children to ‘clean the plate’ or giving sweets as a reward can lead to longer-term problems of overeating.

Offer your child small serves to start and give more if they are still hungry. Remember that meal sizes and overall food intake may vary day-to-day depending on your child’s activity levels and appetite.

Trust your child to decide how much food is enough. This shouldn’t cause problems if a variety of healthy foods are offered.

## Active play

Kindergarten children should be encouraged to be physically active, for a minimum of one hour and up to several hours per day. Being active everyday can help children maintain a healthy weight, help protect against diseases in later life, improve concentration, boost self-esteem and confidence.

Active play also allows development in movement skills. Playing outside rather than inside offers more opportunities for the body to move.

Creative playtime is valuable for your child and includes making up games or activities and opportunities to climb, push, pull, spin and dance creatively. To help your child make up their own activity you may try providing them with props such as hula-hoops, cardboard boxes, cushions, balls and buckets. Parents don’t necessarily have to be active with them each day, but should join in when they can. Children at this age should have daily playtime in a supervised and safe place to have fun and explore their surroundings.

Carers and other family members, such as grandparents, can share in the planning for children to be active everyday. As a family try to:

- Check out what’s available in your local area, whether it is an organised session held every week such as modified gymnastics programs, swimming classes or a network of families who meet up for a play group. You could always set up your own playgroup and invite local families along.
- Plan to do something physical and active together as a family on a weekly basis. Find a park or play area that you can walk or ride to (or cycle, skateboard, scooter) in your neighbourhood, or travel to a nearby ‘play friendly’ place for children to play.
- Invite other children to play with your child and encourage them to do something active together.
- Keep some active play items such as blow up beach ball and small bucket in a bag for when you are leaving the house, in case an opportunity to play arises. Families with cars could leave this equipment in the boot.



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- Support and encourage your child to play games outside, and prompt them to create other ways to move; join in when you can.
- Involve your child in active hobbies such as gymnastics, swimming, dancing or junior sports.
- Remember to be a role model for your child and be active in your own daily life.

## Reduce inactive time

By kindergarten age, children should no longer be dependent on strollers. Let your child walk and allow a little more time if needed.

- Limit the amount of screen time your child has to no more than two hours per day. Screen time includes computer and other electronic games.
- Walk instead of taking the car, when possible. At this age, children are able to walk and the distance should gradually increase.
- No more than 60 minutes a day should be spent sitting or lying still at a time, with the exception of sleep.
- Offer children active options following some inactive time.

## Family mealtimes

Eating as a family when you can is a great chance to spend time together to talk about the day's activities and events. Take time to eat together and relax at mealtimes, try a late breakfast or lunch on the weekend with all the family.

### At mealtimes:

- encourage talking and sharing of daytime activities
- avoid distractions such as TV, radio or the telephone
- let your child decide when they are full; don't argue about food
- discuss some simple nutrition messages such as 'milk helps keep your teeth and bones strong'.

## Meals for kindergarten

Children continue to learn new skills and ideas about food when eating away from home. They can be involved in preparing their lunch box and helping their carers make healthy snacks and lunches. Making meals together can also be an educational and fun activity.

### Lunch box suggestions include:

- a sandwich, fresh fruit and a tub of yoghurt
- lean meat and salad in pita bread, with tinned fruit and plain milk
- milk, yoghurt and water can be frozen in hot weather.

## Healthy snacks

Snacks are an important part of a child's food intake. What children eat is more important than when they eat. As a guide, plan for your child to have three main meals and 2–3 snacks

per day. Try to encourage at least 1 1/2–2 hours between each meal and snack. Try to offer snacks that include fruits, milk products and whole grain cereals.

## Extra foods

By this age children are starting to enjoy the social aspects of food. Having friends often means your child will be eating away from home more, going to parties, and eating at fast food restaurants. While occasional lollies, chips and take-away foods do no harm, if eaten too often they can result in:

- poor intake of other nourishing foods
- high energy intake and the risk of overweight
- increased risk of tooth decay
- constipation.

Enjoy these foods from time to time, at parties with friends or on special occasions with the rest of the family.

## Healthy drinks

Active children need plenty of fluids. Encourage children to have water as their main drink.

Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not needed for a healthy diet and are not recommended.

Children under two should have full cream milk and dairy products. Reduced fat milk/dairy products can be offered to children over two years of age, and skim milk/dairy products can also be offered to children over five years of age.

## Important tips for kindergarten children

- Offer a wide variety of foods every day.
- Encourage healthy eating for everyone in the family.
- Let your child decide if they are full or hungry.
- Offer healthy snacks between meals.
- Encourage children to help prepare meals.
- Encourage water as the main drink.
- Enjoy family mealtime and activities together.
- Set limits to inactive times.
- Encourage a minimum of 60 minutes of planned, structured active play.
- Allow for at least 60 minutes (spread over the day) and up to several hours per day of creative unstructured play.
- Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not necessary.

Prepared by 'Filling the Gaps' – Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, Centre of Physical Activity Across the Lifespan, and Australian Catholic University, Sydney.

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