



Don't Pressure Preschoolers to Overeat, Experts Say

Filling their own plate may help young kids learn to understand their body's hunger cues

SATURDAY, Feb. 8, 2014 (HealthDay News) -- Young children will better learn to recognize when they're full if they serve themselves instead of being given a plate with food already on it, a new study reveals.

Researchers examined the feeding practices among children aged 2 to 5 at 118 child-care centers in the United States. The investigators found that having children and child-care providers sit around a table together at mealtime and serve themselves benefits the youngsters.

"Family-style meals give kids a chance to learn about things like portion size and food preferences," study author Brent McBride, director of the Child Development Laboratory at the University of Illinois, said in a university news release.

"When foods are pre-plated, children never develop the ability to read their body's hunger cues," McBride said. "They don't learn to say, OK, this is an appropriate portion size for me."

The investigators also found that Head Start centers were much more likely to be in compliance with Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics benchmarks than the other centers they looked at in the study.

Those benchmarks are meant to reduce the child obesity rate in the United States, where one-quarter of preschool children are overweight or obese. McBride noted that an estimated 12 million preschoolers eat up to five meals or snacks a day while at child-care centers.

The academy recommends that child-care providers eat with children in order to act as models of healthy eating. In addition, children should not be pressured to take another bite or finish a serving before they're offered another food or activity.

Child-care providers should aim to help children recognize their feelings of hunger or fullness, study co-author Dipti Dev, a graduate student in nutritional sciences, said in the news release.

"Instead of asking 'Are you done?' teachers should ask children 'Are you full?'" she suggested. "Or they should say, 'If you're hungry, you can have some more.' Asking the right questions can help children listen to their hunger and satiety signals," Dev explained.

If a child doesn't want to eat, child-care providers shouldn't urge them to eat out of concern that the youngster may get hungry before the next meal or snack, Dev said.

"If a child doesn't eat at one meal, he'll compensate for it over a 24-hour period. Making kids eat when they're not hungry is probably the worst thing you can do. It teaches them not to pay attention to their body's signals," Dev said.

The findings were published in a recent issue of the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*.

More information

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has more about [preschooler nutrition and health](#).

SOURCE: University of Illinois, news release, Jan. 13, 2014

-- [Robert Preidt](#)