

How much food does your child need?

This is a common question for many parents as the daily needs for a child change so rapidly in the early years. Getting advice from friends and family can be confusing when everyone has their own “tried and true” method that worked for their child. It is even more complicated, of course, because each child has their own *opinion* about what taste good based on evolving tastes and energy levels, which is why your toddler was happy to eat three heaping bowls of sweet potatoes yesterday but doesn’t want to have anything to do with them today. Fortunately, with a few simple guidelines I can help you navigate the changing *needs* of your child. As for their ever-changing *opinions*, well, I am still waiting for the user manual from my kids’ pediatrician and promise to share when he finally comes through.

The guidelines below are simply that, guidelines. They are not hard and fast rules for what your child should consume every day of their life. Just like you, your child will be hungrier one day and not so hungry the next. They may be about to have a growth spurt or may not have had as much opportunity to burn off excess energy. Think in big picture terms. It is always better to look at average consumption over a week rather than obsessing about every bite each day. That being said, I have a few other simple recommendations:

For children ages 2 to 5 years of age getting 30-60 minutes of physical activity daily:

- Serve small portions for scheduled snacks and meals. Only 1/3 to ½ the size of an adult serving is appropriate. Children’s tummies are small and large portions will seem overwhelming and often lead to a lot of wasted food. You can always add more to their plate as you gauge their appetite for the meal.
- Provide a variety of foods each meal and each day. Different foods provide different nutrients and a variety is need to meet your child’s nutrient needs.
- The main beverages at this age should be milk or water milk should be counted as part of their daily needs. Juice consumption should not exceed 4 fluid ounces per day.
- Beware salt in children’s food. All food contains some amount of salt but pre-packaged foods can often provide more than the recommended daily limit for children in one serving. Read labels to know what is going into your child’s body.

For children ages 6 to 12 years of age getting 30-60 minutes of physical activity daily:

- The above recommendations are also relevant for children in this age range; however, serving sizes will start to get bigger. Let your child be in charge of their appetite and continue to provide healthful options.
- Oil and fats are needed in small amounts. Between 1 tsp and 1 Tbsp per day is recommended. Beware of saturated fats, which are those that are solid at room temperature like butter. Also eliminate Trans fats completely. Both saturated and Trans fats are the bad, artery clogging types.

Choose foods low in added sugar and sweeteners. Sugar is not only bad for teeth but it also does not provide anything but energy (also known as calories) to the nutritional value of a food. It can cause a spike in energy levels followed by an energy crash.