Nutrition for Your Child: Ages 3, 4, & 5 Years

Children ages 3, 4, and 5 are eager to learn and become better at doing things on their own. They enjoy active learning using their senses (touch, taste, see, smell, hear). They observe and imitate the behavior of others. Food preferences and eating habits start to form.

Nutritional needs:
Children ages 3, 4, & 5 generally need about 1200 to 1400 calories a day, but those who are very active may need as many as 1600 calories.¹ They can meet their basic nutritional needs by eating the types and amounts of foods listed below each day. The lower end of the range provides ~1200 calories, the higher end provides ~1600 calories. These are general guidelines only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Group</th>
<th>Daily Goal</th>
<th>Tip</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grains</td>
<td>4 to 5 ounce equivalents</td>
<td>Offer whole grains half the time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(1 ounce equivalent = 1 slice bread; ½ cup cooked cereal, rice, pasta; ¾ to 1 cup ready-to-eat low sugar cereal)</td>
<td>Examples: whole wheat bread, whole grain pasta, brown rice, oatmeal, whole grain barley, whole grain wheat flakes cereal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>1-½ to 2 cups</td>
<td>Offer a variety of colors and types of vegetables daily</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fruits</td>
<td>1 to 1-½ cups</td>
<td>Make most choices fruit, not juice, preferably unsweetened</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(½ cup dried fruit = 1 cup fruit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>2 to 3 cups</td>
<td>Offer fat free or low fat types most often</td>
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<td>(1 cup yogurt or 1-½ ounces cheese = 1 cup milk)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meats and Beans</td>
<td>3 to 4 ounce equivalents</td>
<td>Offer a variety of choices each week</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1 ounce equivalent = 1 ounce fish, seafood, skinless poultry, lean beef and pork; 1 egg; 1 Tbsp. peanut butter; ¼ c. cooked dried beans)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oils</td>
<td>4 to 5 teaspoons</td>
<td>Best sources are fatty fish, nuts, seeds, cooking oil (like canola, olive, and soybean oil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extra calories</td>
<td>150 calories</td>
<td>Best sources are extra foods from the 5 main food groups; limit added sugars</td>
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<td>Water</td>
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<td>Offer in place of sweetened drinks</td>
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</table>

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Tips for feeding:

- Continue to maintain a “Division of Responsibility” in regard to feeding.²
  - Parents are responsible for what to eat, where to eat, when to eat.
  - Children are responsible for whether to eat and how much to eat.
- Offer 3 meals a day and between meal snacks at set times. Try to keep to a schedule.
- Offer a variety of colors of fruits and vegetables: red (like apples, raspberries, watermelon; beets, bell peppers), yellow/orange (like mangoes, nectarines, papaya, tangerines; butternut squash, yellow bell peppers, corn), white (like bananas, white peaches; fennel, mushrooms, potatoes), green (like green grapes, kiwi; asparagus, bok choy, broccoli, leafy greens, peas), and blue/purple (like blackberries, purple grapes, dried plums; eggplant, purple cabbage)
- Sit down at a table for meals and snacks; limit eating on the go, in the car, while playing, etc.
- Have family meals and keep mealtimes pleasant. Turn off the TV so you can enjoy being together. Talk. Listen. Avoid pressuring your child to eat.
- Serve your child small portions of each food, or allow him to serve himself. Allow him to have more of any food that is on the table.
- Do not short-order cook, that is, cook something else for the child who refuses to eat what you serve for the rest of the family. Short-order cooking does not help your child learn to eat a variety of foods.
- Offer new foods often and encourage your child to try them. Pair new foods with familiar foods rather than alone with no other choice. Let your child explore new foods with her senses. This increases familiarity and acceptance of new foods. Allow your child to politely spit out (into a napkin) food that she tastes but does not like. She will be more willing to try new foods if she knows she can taste without swallowing. [Reading picture books that introduce your child to new foods will also increase familiarity and perhaps acceptance of new foods.]
- Children ages 3 to 5 years enjoy learning and being helpful. Ask your child to help you in the kitchen with age-appropriate tasks.³
  - 3 year olds:   - roll dough using hands or rolling pin  
  - pour liquids from a small pitcher  
  - shake liquids in a covered container  
  - mix ingredients, 
  - wrap a tortilla around vegetables 
  - use dull knife to spread nut butter 
  - peel an orange, banana, or hard-cooked egg 
  - juice a lemon using a hand juicer 
  - mash bananas, cooked potatoes, etc 
  - shape dough 
  - measure ingredients 
  - cut soft foods using dull knife 
  - beat eggs using a rotary beater 
  - peel vegetables using a peeler 
  - set and clear the table
- Help your child decide whether she is hungry, full, thirsty, etc. (sensations) or happy, sad, angry, etc. (emotions). Do not use food to deal with your child’s emotions or to reward your child.
- Be a positive role model. If you eat and enjoy a well-balanced diet, try new foods, and use polite table manners, chances are that your child will learn to do the same.

References and resources:
2. Gateway to government-sponsored nutrition information: www.nutrition.gov
3. Ellyn Satter, MS, RD, LCSW, BCD, books and web site: www.ellynsatter.com