



13.

The First Dozen Years

CHILDREN LIKE TO EAT, and they develop good food habits from having satisfying experiences with the foods they need for growth and with the people who are providing these foods.

The importance of good food habits, the body's need for many different nutrients, and how these nutrients can be supplied by our daily food have been discussed in previous chapters. This information applies to the first dozen years as well as to the later ones.



The total daily amount of food energy, protein, minerals, and vitamins that a child needs increases steadily, but not rapidly, as he grows through his first dozen years. During his first two or three years he grows faster and needs more food for his size than at any later time in his life. Sometimes after his second birthday he begins to grow more slowly and needs fewer calories in proportion to his size. This slower rate continues until he is about 9 or 10 years old; then it begins to speed up and stays at a more rapid rate until he is somewhere in his mid or late teens.

The erroneous idea that because a child is growing he needs more food than an adult, has led many parents to overfeed their children. This is likely to cause "feeding problems" and sometimes overweight. Not until a boy is 12 or 14 years old is he likely to need as many total calories each day as his father; after that age, and until he is grown, he needs more. Not until a girl is 13 or 14 does she need as much as her mother, and then her need has reached its peak and goes no higher. No child should be permitted to form the habit of eating more than he needs. His weight gain in relation to his height is a good indication of whether his food is supplying the right amount of total calories.

Until a child is 10 to 12 years old his total daily requirements for protein, most vitamins, and iron are *smaller* than those for an adult. (But, like his calorie requirement, these are larger in proportion to his size than for an adult.) His requirements for minerals, calcium, phosphorus, and for vitamin D, however, are *larger* than for the adults. There is no nutritional sub-

stitute for milk in supplying these important minerals for building strong straight bones. Unless the child is getting a great deal of sunshine every month of the year, the doctor will recommend a supplement of vitamin D for the preschool years at least.

The Daily Food Guide for the first dozen years includes more milk and smaller servings of the other food groups than for the adults. Also, in the early years of this age group the flavor of the food will be milder and its consistency smoother, and feeding times may be more frequent than in the later years. The servings need to be very small for the toddler and should increase in size very gradually. As he grows and requires more food, larger or additional servings from *all* of the food groups are needed to supply enough of the essential nutrients. Giving him larger servings only of meat and not of other important foods—milk, vegetables and fruits, breads and cereals—will not provide him with an adequate diet nor help him to form the best food habits.

NEW FLAVORS

Usually children are keenly aware of the flavor and texture and temperature of food. The young child prefers plain food, simply cooked and easy to eat. He prefers mild flavors and smooth, tender textures. He does not like either cooked or raw vegetables that are coarse or stringy. He is sensitive to the temperature of his food and does not want it very hot or cold. He wants his soup cool and his ice cream melted, and urging him to eat something while it is still hot, or before it melts, may interfere with his enjoyment of it. In general, he likes foods such as cooked cereals, mashed potatoes,

and puddings thinner than they usually are prepared for grownups. He wants to see what he is eating, and he favors foods that are easily identified rather than mixtures of foods. His curiosity (and distrust) lead him to pull a sandwich apart or pick the different foods out of a casserole dish. Sometimes he wants each kind of food on a separate dish rather than having them touch or overlap each other on a plate.

A child needs to meet new foods, with their unfamiliar flavors, textures, temperatures, and even colors, in different ways and at different times. Some he will like the first time he meets them, especially if the feeding situation is a pleasant one. He will take longer to get acquainted with others before he enjoys them. A food dislike may last only a few days, and the child should have the opportunity to meet the food again served with different foods or prepared in a different way. There may be a few new flavors which he will never really like.

Talking about a child's food dislikes or eating problems in his presence is unwise because it gives him a reputation he may think he has to live up to! It also shows him he can annoy or worry, or perhaps bribe, his parents by the way he acts toward his food. If a child steadily refuses many foods he needs for normal growth and development, his parents need to be concerned, but they should talk to the doctor or dietitian and not show their concern to him.

A tired or unhappy or sick child is not likely to be interested in new flavors; he wants the comfort of familiar things. The same excitement of travelling and

being away from home that encourages an older child to try new foods may make the young child want to revert to some of the foods he had when he was still younger.

A child may appear to be a "small eater" during the ages from about 3 to 9 years. He is growing more slowly than when he was younger and more slowly than he will when he is older. If he is eating a variety of food from the different food groups in the Daily Food Guide and if he is growing normally, his food habits are good. He should not be urged to eat more than he needs or wants. When his activity and need increase, his appetite will increase to keep pace.

SELF-REGULATION

Healthy children have a large capacity for self-regulation of the amounts of food they need. They are good judges of how much and what to eat when they have a variety of nutritious foods available and are in pleasant situations. Their judgment is not as good, however, when they can choose foods that are sweet and gooey. They are likely to eat too much of these and too little of the fruits and vegetables and milk.

One of the big responsibilities of every mother, therefore, is to see that her family has the kind of food that will make it easy for a child to judge wisely how much is right for him.

A child should never be forced to eat; he will eat what he needs when he is hungry. It is the mother's responsibility to see that he is offered simple nutritious food when he is hungry rather than foods which satisfy



his appetite but contribute little in nutritive value. He should never be disciplined by being denied the food he needs for growth.

A child does not eat exactly the same amount of food every day or every week. He should be permitted to vary the amount within reasonable limits just as an adult does. Also, he goes through phases in his eating when he is tired of cooked cereal, partial to just one or two vegetables, loves peanut butter, or wants all his food mashed because he thinks chewing is too much trouble. These phases are temporary and should not create a crisis in the family.

SOME CHOICE

Developing good eating habits in a child includes having him eat the foods he needs for health and also giving him some free choice in what he eats. One reasonable way to accomplish this would be to prepare the kinds of foods that he needs and give him one small serving of every food. The servings must be small enough so he will want and need more food. This will mean second servings. Now he can have free choice of which foods he wants for seconds. Of course this same plan can apply to everyone in the family.

SNACKS

Most children eat something between meals. Preschool children, especially, need frequent refueling. A child who has become too hungry or too tired waiting for mealtime is not likely to be a good eater. Snacks should include some food from the Daily Food Guide

— milk, fruit, or bread and spread. Snacks of lone-wolf calories have no place in the young child's diet; there is no tummy space or calorie budget for them without his developing the habit of overeating.

Are some foods bad for a child? Mothers ask this particularly about highly seasoned foods, pickles, relishes, jams and jellies, and soft drinks and candy. Small firm pieces of food such as nuts, candy, raw peas, blueberries, huckleberries, whole-kernel corn are not recommended for a young child because he can choke on them. Otherwise it isn't likely that any food is harmful to a child when it is part of a well-balanced diet and when it does not give him more calories than he needs. The danger comes when specialty foods or foods chiefly with lone-wolf calories are allowed *to take the place* of foods he needs for growing. A child will not care for many of the highly seasoned foods and pickle flavors until he is older and acquires a taste for them.

A child's nutritional requirements are high in proportion to his size and his calorie need, and there is a limit to how much food he can eat or his body can use wisely. It is irresponsible of parents, therefore, to permit him to fill up on foods that do not provide the materials needed for energy and growth.

Candy often is a problem because children want too much of it or want it in place of the foods they need for growth. This is usually the result of candy being popular with the grownups, especially parents and relatives. As well as liking it themselves, they use candy as a bribe in withholding it as punishment or in giving it as a reward in many emotional situations.

In addition to candy as a competitor with other foods



which are more important for growth, there is the special problem of its effect on the teeth. Sugar on the surface and in the crevices between teeth forms an acid which attacks the tooth enamel and causes decay. Children often are given candy and other concentrated forms of sugar long before they can understand about good mouth care and about brushing their teeth.



Most of this chapter has been written about the early part of the first dozen years, and there is good reason for this. The patterns of what to do and what to think about food are formed for the child by himself and his parents during these early years of his life. These patterns will have a great influence on the child's health and food habits in the later portion of this dozen years and throughout the years that follow.

The better the early years are, then, the better the later ones are likely to be. Even if the early years have not been good, parents who are informed, understanding, and loving can achieve improvement in a child's nutrition and food habits at any age. It's never too late to begin.

