"One should eat to live, not live to eat" -Benjamin Franklin  
  
  
The early childhood teacher’s role is critical in providing developmentally appropriate activities that promote health and wellness with young children and their families.Were you as astonished as I was to learn about the number of hours students watch television and the impact this interaction with the media has on their eating habits as well as their amount of exercise? We live in the age of junk food junkies with enticing advertisements that encourage this behavior everywhere we turn. Becoming advocates for alternative food and exercise choices are essential if we are to help our young children and their families develop healthier habits.

Week Two proves to be filled with high interest topics for early childhood professionals as we research and learn about the importance of food safety and menu planning for our “little people.” We will look at how important our role as caregivers is to planning lunches and snacks for our students.  We will also have the opportunity to think critically about these issues as they relate to real-life scenarios in our real life classrooms!  
  
What can teachers do? How can they make a difference? Teachers should not only teach their students about healthy eating, but they should also consider the child’s developmental level. The website [MyPyramid](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/Plan/index.html) for Preschoolers (2011) provides a foundation and guide to help with this planning. After teachers consider the age of the children and understand the nutrition requirements for this age group, they must think about the government funded menu planning programs and the amount of money that is in the food budget. As meal plans are created for “everyone,” children with special dietary needs must be met. Some toddlers and preschoolers come to school with food allergans, diabetes, vegetarian eating habits, and cultural and religious preferences.  Integrating the importance of healthy eating to promote wellness can begin in the early childhood classroom with the [myplate](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/downloads/TenTips/DGTipsheet1ChooseMyPlate.pdf) program.

Research has provided us recommended standards to guide help adults and children alike in practicing good nutrition habits. The Dietary Reference Intakes or DRIs help lunchrooms plan food items that contain the essential nutrients required by children. Intense studies also analyze Adequate Intakes (IAs), the Estimated Average Requirements (EARs), the Tolerable Upper Intake Levels (ULs) and the Acceptable Macronutrient Distribution Ranges (AMDRs). Teachers also use daily values (DVs) on food labels to make sure that daily recommended nutrient amounts are met. These are great resources for teachers to review before creating quality meal plans and snacks for their preschoolers. (Nutrition, Health, and Safety for Young Children, 2011)

Did you see in the recent news story about the “calorie camera” placed in San Antonio schools due to a $2 million research project funded by a Department of Agriculture grant? According to Weber (2011), this new “camera program” basically takes a photo of what a child chooses to place on their lunch tray and then takes another photo as the plate is returned so that the calorie and nutrients intake can be analyzed. This is an innovative, yet controversial food monitoring program that helps parents “see” exactly what their children are eating and not eating. Whether you agree with this type of program or not, more and more awareness is being given to our children’s nutrition and health in schools. It is an issue that is becoming more of a priority in our society.

The White House website (2010) with Michelle Obama’s initiative to halt childhood obesity is asking everyone to join efforts so that children may have a longer lifespan. Her nationwide initiative, called “Let’s Move” requires parents to get more involved with nutrition and exercise, improve the quality of foods in lunchrooms, choose more affordable healthy food choices, and focus on physical education. This exercise program enhances the physical growth and motor development in children of all ages. Take a moment to watch this video about her ["Let's Move"](http://www.letsmove.gov/white-house-task-force-childhood-obesity-report-president) campaign.

As you know from prior discussions, I think Dr. Seuss’ stories can be viewed from an adult perspective to gain new insights to share with young children.  As previously mentioned last week, his famous book, Green Eggs and Ham, is the perfect springboard for an age appropriate discussion of healthy eating habits with “little ones.” Wouldn’t this story offer the perfect opportunity to discuss how important it is to eat other “green things” such as “green vegetables” and other healthy foods? Early childhood teachers naturally think of creative strategies and activities to “grab” their students’ attention and make learning fun and relevant to the children’s personal lives. They might even consider giving young children the chance to be “chefs” and prepare their own healthy snacks. Integrating safety activities when cooking such as washing germs off of “little hands” before cooking reinforces these health and safety concepts as children actually experience and make connections to these age appropriate activities. Allowing young learners to be part of the “cooking” process may remove some of their inhibitions about eating things that are different and new to them.

Implementing creative ways into the curriculum to celebrate healthy foods will help to ensure that children are happily embracing a healthy lifestyle. Sharing ideas with parents can reinforce healthy eating habits that the children have been exposed to at school. Partnering with parents encourages them to be a member of the “healthy-eating team” which is critical in teaching their children consistent healthy eating habits. Invitations to nutrition workshops, sharing newsletters filled with simple and healthy recipes and requesting parent volunteers to assist with snacks and classroom activities are some strategies to support the goal of healthful family eating.

**As an early childhood educator, I can verify that planning hands-on discovery based activities for young learners motivates them to use their five senses to internalize the concepts presented.  The “Healthy Food for Preschoolers: Creative Ways to Promote Nutritious Food Choices for Young Children” article suggests hiding vegetables or fruits with different textures, shapes and sizes in a paper bag for the children to feel and guess the name of the food.  Examples would be a fuzzy peach, a smooth tomato, a bumpy strawberry, and a long carrot. Listening to food songs reinforce important facts while children dance and sing along. Resources like this one  have a variety of songs from which to choose.** [Songs for Teaching](http://www.songsforteaching.com/foodnutrition.htm). **Incorporating a snack activity center in the classroom allows the children to follow directions as they make their own healthy treat. What child could resist assembling and tasting this pre-cut “leap froggie?” This snack can be easily made from a green apple, celery, carrots, raisins and Laughing Cow cheese.  Children can also design their own placemats decorated with foods from the food pyramid. How about sharing popcorn, apples, and crackers to describe the crunching sounds they make?**

One of my favorite picture books for picky eaters is I Will Never Eat Another Tomato written and illustrated by [Lauren Child](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/42016.Lauren_Child). Her popular Charlie and Lola books are now an animated series on television. Amazon summarizes the story, “Lola is a fussy eater. A very fussy eater!  She won’t eat her carrots (until her brother Charlie reveals that they’re orange twiglets from Jupiter). She won’t eat her mashed potatoes (until Charlie explains that they’re cloud fluff from the pointiest peak of Mount Fuji). There are many things Lola won’t eat, including - and especially - tomatoes. Or will she? Two endearing siblings star in a witty story about the triumph of imagination over proclivity. Carrots are for rabbits and peas are "too small and too green." Her sister tells her they are “green drops from Greenland.”One day, after rattling off her long list of despised foods, she ends with the vehement pronouncement, "And I absolutely will never not ever eat a tomato." Will she? This proves how a simple story can change the minds of young readers, amazing, isn’t it?  
  
  
  
                                                                                                                                                     
  
           
Remember that role modeling regular and consistent handwashing for our students is the key to preventing the spread of disease from bacteria, viruses, and infection as well as teaching children how to cover a cough or a sneeze. Be sure to check out the educational [Handwashing for Kids](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_yR-oGNMaA)" video with Crawford the Cat. It is a great way to share this important information with "little ones" in a way which they can relate and remember.  
  
Have fun this week planning your menus and thinking of new strategies to inspire our students and families to practice a healthier lifestyle. We really can make a difference!  
  
  
Resources

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