



# Role Modeling Healthy Eating for Child Care Providers & Early Childhood Education Teachers

*Katherine E. Speirs*



Role modeling is a great way to help young children eat healthy foods, develop healthy eating habits, and have peaceful mealtimes.<sup>1,2</sup> Children learn from watching the adults in their lives and copying their behavior.<sup>3</sup> As shown in the picture above, if they see you eating fruits and vegetables young children will want to try them too!

## How to Role Model Healthy Eating During Mealtimes

Role modeling works best when you eat the same foods as the children AND enthusiastically talk about enjoying the foods you are eating.<sup>4,5</sup>

- Talk about the rewards of eating healthy foods.
  - “I like blueberries in the summer! They taste good and are refreshing!”
  - “Bananas are my favorite! They give me a lot of energy!”
- Smile and show enjoyment when eating healthy foods or offering them to children.<sup>6,7</sup>
- Don’t worry if children do not follow your lead the first time. Children may need to see you do something several times before they copy you.<sup>8</sup>

- Avoid negative comments about food, such as: “I don’t like corn.” or “Spinach smells funny.” Negative comments might stop children from trying new foods or eating foods they already like.
- If there is something that you cannot eat without showing that you dislike it, put it on your plate. Do not mention that you are not eating it.
- Avoid eating less healthy foods such as candy, chips, and soda in front of children. If you want to eat these foods, do it when you are not around young children.

## How to Role Model Healthy Eating Even if You Don’t Eat the Same Food as the Children

Many child care providers and early childhood teachers are not able to eat the same foods as the children. Even if this is the case, you can still be a good role model.

- Sit with the children during mealtimes and talk about what they are eating.
- Explain why you enjoy eating the healthy foods the children are eating.

- Encourage the children to try healthy foods. You can say: “Do you want to try the peas? They are good for you! I enjoy eating peas!” Do not pressure children to eat.
- If you bring your lunch and eat with the children, make sure your meals are healthy. If possible, find out what the children will be eating and bring some of the same foods.



## How to Role Model Healthy Eating Throughout the Day

The more children interact with and experience healthy foods, the more likely they are to consume them.<sup>12</sup> Using activities throughout the day that include healthy foods will give you a chance to role model healthy eating all day.<sup>13</sup> When you are not eating, you can be a good role model by talking enthusiastically about fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods and explaining why you like to eat them.

- **Read books** that feature healthy foods, as shown in the picture above. While reading, talk about why you enjoy eating healthy foods and ask the children about their favorite fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods. A few books to try: *Eating the Alphabet* by Lois Ehlert, *I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato* by Lauren Child, and *Feast for 10* by Cathryn Falwell.
- **Use dramatic play spaces** to role model healthy eating. Provide spaces where children can pretend to cook, eat, shop for, and grow healthy foods. While children are playing in these spaces, talk to them about your favorite healthy foods and why you enjoy eating them.
- **Plan field trips** that allow children to taste fruits and vegetables and learn how they grow. Visit a farmers’ market and go on a fruit and vegetable scavenger hunt. During or after the field trip, eat some of the foods from the field trip with the children.

## For more information about Role Modeling Healthy Eating

Contact your local Cooperative Extension office at [extension.arizona.edu](http://extension.arizona.edu) or visit [choosemyplate.gov](http://choosemyplate.gov) or [healthykidshealthyfuture.org](http://healthykidshealthyfuture.org) for helpful resources including information that can be shared with parents.

## How to Use Peer Role Modeling

Children learn from other children’s behavior in the same way they learn from adults.<sup>9</sup>

Encourage children to be good role models for each other.

- Make sure children eat together and, when possible, have them eat the same foods.
- When a child is happily eating, draw attention to their eating, as shown in the picture above. Ask the child to talk about why they enjoy the food they are eating.<sup>2</sup>
- When possible, avoid having children show dislike for the foods they are eating. Try setting a rule that if a child does not like a food, they can say no thank you and choose not to eat it, but they should not say anything negative about it.<sup>10,11</sup>
- Use assigned seats at mealtimes and try sitting children in different combinations to find one that works well to promote healthy eating.
- If children bring less healthy foods from home, do not bring other children’s attention to these foods in a positive or negative way. Instead, direct conversation to other topics. Give parents suggestions for healthy foods to send with their children. Provide this information to all families not just a few families.

## Acknowledgements

All pictures were created by Paul Fini a Senior Web Site Designer/Developer in the BioCommunications department of the University of Arizona.

## References

1. DeCosta P, Møller P, Frøst MB, Olsen A. Changing children's eating behaviour - A review of experimental research. *Appetite*. 2017;113:327-357. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2017.03.004
2. Shim JE, Kim J, Lee Y, et al. Fruit and Vegetable Intakes of Preschool Children Are Associated With Feeding Practices Facilitating Internalization of Extrinsic Motivation. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*. 2016;48(5):311-317.e1. doi:10.1016/j.jneb.2016.01.003
3. Bandura A. *Social Learning Theory*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall; 1977.
4. Hendy HM, Raudenbush B. Effectiveness of teacher modeling to encourage food acceptance in preschool children. *Appetite*. 2000;34(1):61-76. doi:10.1006/appe.1999.0286
5. Lumeng JC, Cardinal TM, Jankowski M, Kaciroti N, Gelman SA. Children's use of adult testimony to guide food selection. *Appetite*. 2008;51(2):302-310. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2008.03.010
6. Barthomeuf L, Droit-Volet S, Rousset S. How emotions expressed by adults' faces affect the desire to eat liked and disliked foods in children compared to adults: Emotion and desire to eat. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*. 2012;30(2):253-266. doi:10.1111/j.2044-835X.2011.02033.x
7. Frazier BN, Gelman SA, Kaciroti N, Russell JW, Lumeng JC. I'll have what she's having: the impact of model characteristics on children's food choices: Model impact on children's food choices. *Developmental Science*. 2012;15(1):87-98. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7687.2011.01106.x
8. Cruwys T, Bevelander KE, Hermans RCJ. Social modeling of eating: A review of when and why social influence affects food intake and choice. *Appetite*. 2015;86:3-18. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2014.08.035
9. Ward S, Bélanger M, Donovan D, et al. "Monkey see, monkey do": Peers' behaviors predict preschoolers' physical activity and dietary intake in childcare centers. *Preventive Medicine*. 2017;97:33-39. doi:10.1016/j.ypmed.2017.01.001
10. Greenhalgh J, Dowe AJ, Horne PJ, Fergus Lowe C, Griffiths JH, Whitaker CJ. Positive- and negative peer modelling effects on young children's consumption of novel blue foods. *Appetite*. 2009;52(3):646-653. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2009.02.016
11. Houldcroft L, Haycraft E, Farrow C. Peer and friend influences on children's eating: peer and friend influences on eating. *Social Development*. 2014;23(1):19-40. doi:10.1111/sode.12036
12. Heath, P, Houston-Price, C, & Kennedy, OB. Increasing food familiarity without the tears. A role for visual exposure? *Appetite*. 2011;57(3):832-838. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2011.05.315
13. de Droog, SM, Buijzen, M, & Valkenburg, PM. Enhancing children's vegetable consumption using vegetable-promoting picture books. The impact of interactive shared reading and character-product congruence. *Appetite*. 2014;73:73-80. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2013.10.01



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Cooperative Extension

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND LIFE SCIENCES  
TUCSON, ARIZONA 85721

**KATHERINE SPEIRS**

Assistant Specialist, Early Childhood/Childhood Development

**CONTACT:**

**KATHERINE SPEIRS**

**[kspeirs@email.arizona.edu](mailto:kspeirs@email.arizona.edu)**

**This information has been reviewed  
by University faculty.**

**[extension.arizona.edu/pubs/az1808-2020.pdf](http://extension.arizona.edu/pubs/az1808-2020.pdf)**

**Other titles from Arizona Cooperative Extension  
can be found at:**

**[extension.arizona.edu/pubs](http://extension.arizona.edu/pubs)**

Any products, services or organizations that are mentioned, shown or indirectly implied in this publication do not imply endorsement by The University of Arizona.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jeffrey C. Silvertooth, Associate Dean & Director, Extension & Economic Development, Division of Agriculture, Life and Veterinary Sciences, and Cooperative Extension, The University of Arizona.

The University of Arizona is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution. The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or genetic information in its programs and activities.