

Raising Healthy Children: Age Four¹

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As children continue their preschool years, they learn many new things and develop their own opinions and ideas. During this time, people inside and outside of the home may greatly influence them. As preschoolers continue to learn and grow, caregivers can take many steps to guide their children in a healthy and positive direction.

A Guide to Healthy Eating

Responsible food choices are an important way of keeping your child healthy during his or her growing years. Parents can use the *MyPlate Daily Food Plan for Preschoolers* to help guide a preschooler's daily eating habits. (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/Plan/index.html>.)

The table below outlines the general guidelines for each food group for a 4-year-old child. (USDA, 2011):

Table 1.

Grains	5 ounce equivalents
Vegetables	1 ½ cups
Fruit	1-1 ½ cups
Milk (Dairy)	2 ½ cup equivalents
Meat & Beans (Protein Foods)	4 ounce equivalents
*You should also allow no more than 4 teaspoons of oil per day and limit solid fats and sugars to 170 calories per day (USDA, 2011).	

According to the USDA, a 4-year-old child needs about 5 ounces of grains each day. One ounce of grains is equal to one slice of bread, one cup of cereal, or ½ cup of cooked rice or pasta (USDA, n.d., Grains).

In addition to grains, a 4-year-old child needs 1½ cups of vegetables and 1½ cups of fruit every day. Fruits and vegetables can be raw, dried, cooked, or served as juice. If part of your child's fruit intake is juice, however, be sure it is 100% fruit juice. Also, note that ½ cup of dried fruit is equal to a 1 cup serving (USDA, n.d., Fruits; USDA, n.d., Vegetables).

Dairy foods include milk, yogurt, cheese, and milk-substitute products, such as soy milk. One slice (1½ ounces) of hard cheese, such as cheddar and Swiss cheese, or one slice of processed cheese (2 ounces), such as American cheese, counts as a ½ cup of dairy (USDA, n.d., Dairy). Low-fat and fat-free dairy foods are the best choices for your child's 2½ recommended cups and for the rest of your family.

Lastly, one ounce of protein is equal to ¼ cup of cooked beans, one egg, one tablespoon of peanut butter, ½ ounce of nuts or seeds, and one ounce of meat, poultry, or fish (USDA, n.d., Protein Foods). When choosing meat for your children look for leaner options, such as fish or skinless chicken and turkey. When cooking other types of meat, be sure to remove the visible fat. (For information about how much of each food your child needs to be eating to meet the requirements, visit www.choosemyplate.gov.)

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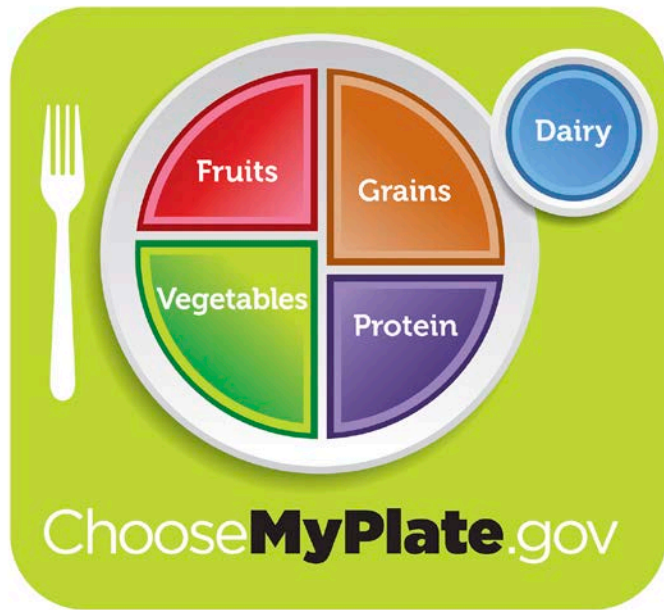


Figure 1. MyPlate offers a set of guidelines to help Americans choose healthy foods and eat appropriate portion sizes.

Credits: USDA

Snack Time

Snack time is a great opportunity to introduce children to new foods, to encourage them to make healthy choices, and to let them help prepare their snacks. Giving 4-year-old children a few healthy options helps them develop independence and makes healthy eating a fun activity. Try to vary snack choices each day and incorporate snacks that contain at least two food groups. While you may occasionally serve sweets and sugar-sweetened beverages, such as candy, cookies, soda, sweetened tea, and fruit-flavored drinks, keep the focus on healthier snack options (USDA, n.d., *Snack Ideas*).

Various Snack Ideas from the USDA

- Combine dry cranberries with popcorn
- Make a snack mix using whole-grain, dried cereal
- Dip frozen fruit into nonfat yogurt

(For more snack ideas, visit <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/downloads/TenTips/DGTipsheet11KidFriendlyVeggiesAndFruits.pdf> for some fun snack ideas to try with your child.)

Getting Involved at Meal Time

As children begin developing their own preferences and opinions about foods, family meals are a good time to reinforce healthy eating habits. You can set a good example for your child by eating with him or her (USDA, n.d., *Health and Nutrition*). Letting your preschooler see you enjoy fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can encourage

him or her to try these foods and learn to enjoy them as well (CDC, 2012a). If your child is a “picky” eater, then pair new foods with familiar, well-liked foods. However, avoid overwhelming him or her with too many new choices at once. It may take more than one try for your child to become familiar with a new food to enjoy it, so be patient and do not pressure him or her (Satter, 2012a).

Eating meals with your child sets a good example and paves the way for good eating habits in the future. During the meal, set a good example because your child is likely to copy your actions (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2010). At your child’s age, it is also a good time to begin teaching him or her how to behave at the table. You can also get your child involved in family meals by teaching your child how to set the table and letting him or her help with safe cooking activities (USDA, n.d., *Set a Good Example*).

Safe Cooking Activities for your Child (Galvin, 2011)

- Tear lettuce for a salad
- Add and toss pre-cut vegetables to a salad
- Measure dry ingredients
- Stir batter
- Add toppings to a pizza



Figure 2. Get your children involved in family meals by having them help with safe cooking activities.

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Physical Activity

Preschoolers should actively play several times a day and get at least 60 minutes of physical activity (CDC, 2011a). Provide play equipment and offer your child options that make physical activity fun to help develop decision-making skills (USDA, n.d., *How Much Physical Activity is Needed?*).

Ways to Lead an Active Lifestyle for your Child

- Go for walks
- Play active games as a family
- Turn chores, such as sweeping or wiping the table, into games, which will also make your child feel like a responsible family member (PBS Parents, n.d.)

Now that your child is becoming more independent and engaging in new activities, such as sports, remember to promote safety. For example, make your child wear a helmet on a bike, and watch your child when he or she is playing outside (CDC, 2011b).



Figure 3. A bike ride with your child is great way to show him or her how to lead an active lifestyle.

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Screen Time

Limit your child's TV or computer time to one to two hours a day, and encourage him or her to be physically active, read books, or color. Because TV ads for junk food will likely influence your preschooler, keep healthy snacks at home, which will also encourage your child to choose healthier items when you are not around (CDC, 2012b).

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