

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS

EARLY CHILDHOOD NUTRITION

Nutrition is essential to a child's growth and development from conception to adolescence. Inadequate nutrition can affect neurological, physical, social and emotional development.

Providing good nutrition to any young child can be a challenging task. When a child is not developing typically, good nutrition becomes an integral component of early intervention.

Children with special needs have the same nutritional needs as babies who are developing typically, though it may be harder to achieve diet recommendations when a medical condition or a delay prevents the child from easily getting all the nutrients he or she needs, especially if feeding or behavioral issues are present. Exceptions include premature and low birth weight infants, who have higher requirements for protein, calories, and nutrients to support catch up growth, and infants with Prader-Willi syndrome who may need fewer calories than other infants.

But for many other children with special needs, the age-appropriate diet guidelines developed by pediatricians for all children should be the starting point for good nutrition. If there are reasons for concern due to a medical or feeding issue, nutrition screening and assessment may be used to determine if a child requires a different approach to get adequate nutrition.

Screening for Nutrition Concerns

A nutrition screening is designed to survey a child's diagnosis and medical conditions, drug

and nutrient interactions, food allergies and intolerances, feeding concerns, diet variety and growth. The purpose of nutrition screening is to identify children who may benefit from nutrition assessment and intervention.

The best way to identify whether a child has feeding problems is to observe him during a feeding time in a familiar environment with the parent or caregiver. When feeding problems are identified, they can usually be attributed to oral motor, positioning, or behavioral issues.

Some clues for identifying possible feeding problems in young children include:

- Hypersensitivity to touch in or around the mouth
- Intolerance for consistencies or textures
- Coughing, choking, gagging or vomiting
- Limiting movements of jaw, tongue, lips and cheeks when eating or drinking
- Poor lip closure around nipple, spoon, or cup
- Severe dental problems or cavities

Because these issues may exist alone or in combination, it is important for the appropriate early intervention team members to work closely with the family when assessing and addressing feeding problems.

How are Nutrition Issues Assessed?

When screening indicates the need for further information, a detailed nutrition assessment is recommended. Nutrition screening and



This parent guide is based on the *Service Delivery Guidelines for Alaska: Early Childhood Nutrition*. The complete guidelines are available online at earlyintervention.alaska.gov

assessments are most often conducted by nutritionists with the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program after referral to an early intervention/infant learning program (EI/ILP). A nutritionist may ask a parent to keep a careful diary of what a child eats so that a doctor can examine and identify their current eating habits. Because a child's food habits, food intake, and growth change rapidly during the earliest years, nutrition screening should be an ongoing process.

Children who may have nutrition issues should also have growth screenings, which can be performed by a healthcare provider and will be based on growth charts created by the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control. Children with conditions like Down Syndrome or pre-term and low birth weight infants have specialized growth charts because they develop differently.

How Can EI/ILP Help?

If a child receiving EI/ILP services is found to have nutritional needs that could affect his or her development, an individualized intervention plan is developed. For children whose nutritional needs are medical in nature, assessment and intervention will occur either as part of the child's medical care, through the EI/ILP team, or be coordinated between the two.

EI/ILP supports a team approach for providing evidence-based, family centered services that take into account the child's and families unique strengths and needs. By providing early intervention services within the child's natural environment and

continuing to listen to the family throughout the process, the intervention techniques can be designed and modified according to the child's and family's needs.

What Does Early Intervention for Nutrition Look Like?

EI/ILP can help parents access a range of nutrition interventions and family supports:

Lactation Assistance. Breastfeeding offers the same nutritional benefits to a child born with special needs as it does for any newborn, plus several additional advantages. An interventionist can help mothers who choose to breastfeed but find it difficult with a child with medical or developmental problems.

Tube Feeding. Tube feeding may be used when children cannot safely take in sufficient calories by mouth. Some children may later be transitioned to oral feeding.

Nutrition Counseling. A nutrition specialist can provide nutrition counseling and education while accounting for food preferences, availability, and cultural and environmental factors that affect food choice.

Specialized Diet. After examining a child's nutritional needs, including any nutrient or mineral deficits and any allergies or intolerances, a nutritionist may create a specialized diet for a child or recommend a specific type of formula that is hypoallergenic or lactose free. A nutritionist may also recommend vitamin supplements to increase certain nutrients in a child's diet.

For More Information

Alaska Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program earlyintervention.alaska.org
(877) HSS-FMLY. (907) 269-8442. TT Relay (800) 770-TYPE

Alaska WIC..... www.hss.state.ak.us/dpa/programs/nutri/wic
(907) 465-3100

New Visions: Practical Information on Feeding..... www.new-vis.com

WIC Works Resource System wicworks.nal.usda.gov