



## ***Butterfly Radio: Part 2***

*Nutrition: How variety and balance support a thriving body over a lifetime*

SYLVIA

Let's continue by turning to general nutrition. We're often reminded to eat and serve nutritious food, because, of course, healthy eating builds strong bodies and strong minds. But how do we follow up on those reminders in the different real-life circumstances we face in a preschool classroom or at home? It's easier said than done, especially with preschoolers.

Ok...we have Karolina from Orlando, Florida. Karolina, you're on *Butterfly Radio*.

KAROLINA

Oh! Hi. Um. I'm, sorry. I'm a little nervous.

SYLVIA

No problem, Karolina. Take your time.

KAROLINA

Well, I always feel so confused about this topic...

SYLVIA

Which topic is that?

KAROLINA



You know, general nutrition.

SYLVIA

Go on.

KAROLINA

I'm confused; because the little four-year-olds I'm working with don't understand what nutrition is and what's good for them. They're just learning basic concepts. I hear a lot of nutrition talk, but it seems to me kind of unrealistic to get young children to learn about nutrition.

SYLVIA

You know what, Karolina, you're absolutely right! Your question actually raises an important point: ***We shouldn't attempt to explain to***



***young children concepts like healthy or unhealthy or label foods good or bad. These concepts are too complex for them to understand. The goal is to teach children through exposure and role modeling!***

KAROLINA

Okay, that makes sense. But how do I do that?

SYLVIA

One simple strategy is to serve children a lot of variety and balance in their meals. That way nutrition can have many faces, and can be achieved in various ways, through different cultural and religious traditions and despite all kinds of obstacles, be they children's medical needs or lack of easy access to fresh food.

***When adults serve children a variety of different foods on a regular basis, children get the nutrients they need to grow strong and healthy and, just as important, learn the habit of eating and enjoying different foods.*** That's a foundation of maintaining a healthy body and healthy weight.



KAROLINA

But Sylvia, can you help me understand variety and balance? I've just never really got that. I mean variety of what? And what are we trying to balance?

SYLVIA



Okay, so remember this: ***we get variety when we serve and eat a combination of foods from the five food groups: fruits, grains, proteins, vegetables, and dairy.*** So, knowing what foods are in what group is key to assembling a balanced meal for children. Here's a quick summary:

*Fruits* include any fruit, such as oranges, bananas, apples, grapes, and all the other fruits you can find at the grocery store. Although 100% fruit juice counts as a fruit, you shouldn't serve more than 4-6 oz per day to young children. It's better to serve children whole fruit. That's because the flesh in whole fruit has lots of other nutrients, like fiber, that are absent in juice. Fiber helps support digestion and control blood sugar and helps you feel full! This is actually a really important topic, so I've put some resources on fruit juice on the website.

*Grains* include bread, rice, oatmeal, cereals, pastas, and tortillas, among others. Grains can be a bit tricky, because there are two types: whole grains and refined grains. Refined grains include white breads, white rice, spaghetti, and macaroni. Whole grains include whole-wheat bread, brown or wild rice, and whole-wheat crackers and pastas. They're called whole grains, because, well, the whole or entire grain is used, and that makes them extremely nutritious. Always look for foods that have the first ingredient listed as a whole grain, such as 100% whole wheat or whole-grain oats. Ideally, children should be served whole grains most of the time, but it's crucial to make sure that at least that half of the grains served are whole grains.

You still with me Karolina?

KAROLINA

Yeah, yeah, I am.

SYLVIA

Great. Next we have *Vegetables*, which are super important to a balanced diet as well and include foods like carrots, broccoli, peppers, tomatoes, and sweet potatoes. In a balanced diet, vegetables should make up a significant portion of any plate.

The *Proteins* food group include food loaded with proteins such as meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, processed soy products, nuts, seeds, and, believe it or not, beans and peas, which are also part of the vegetable group.

*Dairy* includes things like milk, yogurt, and cheese.

Each meal should include food from each of the food groups. Balancing the different food groups ensures the balance of macronutrients and micronutrients our body needs.

KAROLINA

I get food groups, but I'm not a scientist. What were those words you just used? Something about nutrients?

SYLVIA

We need to eat a lot macronutrients to sustain health and make our bodies and minds strong; they include proteins, fats, carbohydrates, and fiber, and you find them in all the food groups in varying amounts. Micronutrients are also vital to maintain health, but we need a much smaller (micro) amount of them; they include vitamins and minerals like calcium, vitamin C, iron, and magnesium, which are found in varying amounts in different foods. Of course, it's also important to remember that no one food contains all the macro- and micronutrients you need, and that's why you need the balance of everything

So, for example, milk is in the dairy food group. It's nutritious, because it provides macronutrients like protein, carbohydrates, and fat and micronutrients like calcium and potassium. It's a real nutrition powerhouse! For comparison, take a non-diet soda, which has lots and lots of sugar and calories but almost no nutrients (macro or micro).

Each macronutrient and micronutrient has a different role in our bodies. I've put a lot of information about this on our website, which I hope you look at. But, since it's a bit unrealistic to ask you to remember every single detail we're covering, I'll say it again: ***serve and eat meals that include foods from the different food groups, and you and the young children you're caring for will get most, if not all, of the nutrients the body needs.***



A simple thing to remember is that half the plate should be fruits and vegetables, a quarter protein, and a quarter grains.

KAROLINA

I like your example of milk. It's easy with milk, because most kids love it. But having them eat half a plate of fruits and vegetables? Well, that's a different story!

SYLVIA

True. True. [laughs] But don't get discouraged. Here's the thing.



***Children might not eat a half a plate of fruits, veggies, and beans, but that's what they should be served.*** We want children to think it's normal to have a plate filled with those types of foods, even if they don't eat them all. It's important for young children to think of fruits and veggies as a major part of any meal—not as a tiny portion off to the side.

KAROLINA

Yeah, but I've noticed that at mealtimes, children often only eat one type of food. They won't even look at anything else. One day it might be chicken and the next day it might be mac and cheese.

SYLVIA

They do, Karolina—I know—but you still need to keep offering a variety of foods to them! ***The good news is that young children don't need to consume from every food group during every meal, or even every day. The fact is that if you continually offer them different kinds of food over several days, most children will end up naturally inclining toward a balanced diet and will get the nutrition they need.*** This self-regulation by children is hard for adults to believe, or rely on, but it's been studied and proven. Young children's intakes will often widely fluctuate day-to-day, even meal-to-meal. Don't worry - research has shown that over time, they will get the nutrition and calories they need when presented with a variety of healthful eating opportunities.



Look, we all know that children are naturally picky eaters, and it might take a long time for them to try new foods, but as their caregiver, it's important for you to understand that if you regularly offer them a variety of different foods and you model eating diverse meals yourself, they will often give it a try eventually, even if it's only a little tiny bit. In time, though, those little bits add up, and the child develops the habit of eating and enjoying different types of foods. And that's why, for us as caregivers, our own habit of serving diverse meals is key!

KAROLINA

Really!?

SYLVIA

Yes, I said it quickly, but I want to highlight again that you also need to model being open to eating a diversity of foods. Children love you, and of course they want to emulate you. If they see you eating broccoli with your lunch, they'll be more eager to try it themselves.

KAROLINA

I get that. In our program we eat with the kids and usually eat the same kinds of food. But, you know, when I'm shopping, it's sometimes hard to get food from all these food groups. It's not like we have access to a fresh farm next door. I'm trying, I really am, but there seems to be so many obstacles to making it happen. To be honest, it's a bit frustrating, because everyone's like "fresh, fresh, fresh." I mean, we don't even have a full-scale grocery store nearby. The other day a parent got mad at me, because we're serving frozen veggies and fruits to the kids in our classroom. She wanted us only to serve *fresh* veggies and fruits, because she said they're healthier. But, of course, we can't do that on our budget. It's crazy talk. But then I started thinking...is she right? Is frozen food bad?

SYLVIA

Not at all! Actually, ***servicing frozen fruits and vegetables is a great way to get children lots of nutrients.***

KAROLINA

Does the same go for *canned* foods?



SYLVIA

Sure does. ***Canned veggies and fruits ensure that children have access to all the nutrients they need even when fresh food is hard to come by.*** And, of course, canned foods last for so long! One thing to note about canned items, though, is to be sure to buy fruit packed in its own juice rather than in a sugary syrup and veggies packed in water with low salt or sodium.

Reading labels is always a good idea, so I've put some information on the website about what to look for and what to look out for. When I go shopping I spend a lot of my time in the store reading the labels, because you can learn a lot about the food from them. In time, it becomes a habit. In general, items with lower sugar and sodium levels are better for us. Instead, we want a lot of good macro- and micronutrients, like fiber or protein.

Karolina, all of your question have been great...

KAROLINA

Wait, wait. Can you just tell me the main points one more time?

SYLVIA

Yes. Yes. Of course.

Variety and balance ensure nutritious meals.

Eat and serve meals that include food from the various food groups.

Diverse meals are full of different types of macronutrients and micronutrients.

Young children won't eat from all the food groups at each meal, but you should still offer them a variety of different foods.

Teachers need to roll model eating different types of foods.

Frozen and canned foods can be very nutritious as well; just remember to read the labels.

I know that at many preschools, the school prepares the food or children bring in their own lunch, and some programs even have healthy eating regulations in place. Still, caregivers should understand these concepts and understand them well. If you know the basics about nutrition, you'll be able have a stronger partnership with your students' families, you'll experience

less anxiety during mealtimes, and you can serve snacks and lunches that are helpful for children learning to eat in a healthful way.

KAROLINA

Got it. You know, this isn't so confusing. Thanks, Sylvia! This has been great.

SYLVIA

Karolina, feel free to call back any time!

