Do preschool children need snacks?

About 30% of a preschooler’s daily caloric intake is consumed as snacks. Do preschool children really need to eat snacks? Snacks in this case refer to between-meal eating occasions and not a type of food such as potato chips served with a sandwich at lunch. Young children need between-meal snacks because their energy needs are high, but their tummies may be too small for them to consume all their needed calories in just three meals. “Preschool children need calories for health, growth and play and may need as many as 1,000 to 1,600 calories per day depending on age, gender and physical activity level,” said Dr. Sharon Robinson, Associate Professor and Registered Dietitian with Texas AgriLife Extension Service.

Caregivers should offer preschool children three meals and one to two snacks every day. It’s best to offer meals and snacks about the same time each day. Having a structured eating pattern helps to prevent children from eating throughout the day and will cut down on children eating when they are bored or during sedentary activity such as watching television.

Robinson advises caregivers to offer at least two foods from the MyPlate food groups during snack time. MyPlate food groups are: vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy and protein foods. Examples are:

- Apple slices with peanut butter and water
- Whole wheat crackers, tuna fish salad and 100% fruit juice
- Mandarin oranges and milk
- Small bean burrito with cheese and water

Preschoolers are more likely to enjoy a new food at snack time if they helped in its preparation and see their family eating it too. Robinson said, “Parents tend to stop offering a new food after 3 or 4 times. However, we know from research that often it takes 10 to 12 offerings before a young child will accept a new food.”

To find science-based information on feeding preschool children go to: http://www.choosemyplate.gov/.

The Texas AgriLife Extension Service offers free and low-cost nutrition and health programs. Please contact your local County Extension Agent for more information.

Source: http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers.html