Child care experts offer tips for tots' food

by John O'Connell

If your child watches too much TV, is a picky eater, battles you at bedtime or spurns potty training, child care authorities offer some practical advice for frustrated parents.

A good resolution for some parents might be to cut back their children's television viewing, said Jan Deissler, director of Child Care Connection at Illinois Central College. She is shocked by studies that find many children are watching anywhere from three to eight hours of television per day.

BE IT RESOLVED - Child care experts serve up some suggestions for frustrated parents. CNS Photo by Scott Adrian Hinton.Excessive television viewing can impede language development, which is best developed through reading, play and talking with others. It also can promote obesity and an unhealthy lifestyle, child care authorities say. Television viewing consumes about as many calories as sleeping.

"The more time children spend in front of a non-interactive device like television, the less time they spend with people or playing with toys," Deissler said. "Children learn more by interacting with people. One hour of television a day is plenty for a young child. And parents need to select good, appropriate television programming for their children."

Lee Ann Isbell, director of Methodist Family Child Care Center in Peoria, Ill., also recommends parents restrict television viewing.

"Children learn by doing, by exploring," Isbell explained. "Read to your children and play with them. TV does not let them get engaged. There are some good shows on television for children to watch. But too much is detrimental. Some children watch so much TV they get spaced out or zoned out while watching it."

BUSY KIDS

Overscheduling children is another concern of child care experts. Some well-meaning parents have their youngsters in too many activities, Deissler said. One study found that in the past 20 years there has been a decline of up to 12 hours per week in children's free time.

"Young children are being driven to soccer practice, music lessons and so forth," she added.

"They are constantly on the go. That's not good for the child or the parent. My advice to parents of young children is to limit their outside activities. These activities aren't bad in themselves. But I would say one structured activity is enough for a child between the ages of 1 and 6."

Children need unstructured playtime, Deissler said. Children learn while playing. For instance, she said, they learn geometric concepts by playing with blocks and science by fingering play dough.

SETTING RULES

An advanced college degree isn't required to be a successful parent. Parents grow in knowledge as their children grow, Isbell said.

"You simply need to be reasonable, practical and loving," she said. "Young children like routine. Consistency and routine are very important to them. They like structure and predictability. And they respond best when they know what is expected of them."

When establishing rules for young children, they should be clearly defined and simple enough for the child to understand, the child care authorities said. Consequences for not following the rules must be known in advance. And when the rules are enforced, it should be done with fairness, firmness and without emotion - no screaming or yelling.

"If a parent or guardian is concerned about a child's behavior or development, they should consult with their pediatrician or child care provider," Isbell said. "There is plenty of help available. For instance, there is developmental screening available through Easter Seals or through the local school districts."

Here is more advice for dealing with common behavior problems of children ages 1 to 6:

BEDTIME FUSS

Having the same bedtime routine will eliminate many problems. A routine gives children a way to know what is expected of them.

"Try to keep to the same bedtime," Isbell said. "And have a set routine - give them a bath, brush their teeth, get their pajamas on and read a bedtime story to them. You can also play a quiet game or listen to soft music together. But it's important to do the same thing every night.

"You also want to make sure they have gone to the bathroom and have gotten their drink of water before they climb into bed. If they look for an excuse to get out of bed, just say - very calmly - 'It's time to go to sleep.' And then leave the room. Don't reinforce negative behavior."

POTTY TRAINING

Somewhere between 18 months and age 3, most children begin showing signs they are ready to be potty trained. They may start staying dry for longer and longer periods of time. They may become uncomfortable with dirty diapers and begin asking to be changed or even ask to use the potty chair.

"Every child is different when it comes to potty training," Isbell said. "Some are ready at 2. For others, it may be 2 1/2 or 3 years of age before they get going on potty training. I would say for most children today it's later rather than sooner. If you try too early in life, it may become a battle of the wills. Let it happen on the child's schedule.

"And when it happens, make it a positive experience. When they go potty, praise them by clapping or reward them with stickers."

If a child isn't making progress toward being potty trained by age 4, a parent or guardian may want to talk to a doctor or child care provider about their concerns, Isbell said.

PICKY EATERS

For some children, snacking throughout the day may cause them not to be hungry at dinnertime. If this is the case, Isbell recommends having specific snack times.

"Children need snacks during the day, but have them so they are evenly spaced with mealtimes," Isbell said. "You don't want them grazing throughout the day."

It's normal for children to refuse a meal now and then, Isbell said. The child may be between growth spurts and just not hungry.

"Offer them healthy, nutritious meals and limit sugars," the child care expert said. "If they don't eat, they don't eat. Don't make a battle out of it."

If the child is refusing meal after meal, the parent should talk to a doctor about the problem.

It is important to include children at the family dinner table as early as possible. The dinner table provides learning opportunities for small children.

"They increase their language skills by listening to conversations and talking at the table," Isbell said. "They also develop social skills and fine motor skills using a spoon and cup.

"Make dinnertime fun and create learning opportunities. If old enough, have the child help set the table with you. And count the number of forks and spoons with them."

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