



Aldo Sebastián Gaona eating lunch at the My Little Friends childcare center.

Promoting Healthful Habits and Food Preferences in Young Children

Many families today are unable to care for their children during the day because both parents work. Because of this, there is a need for the services of a nursery or childcare center for many small children. The childcare center My Little Friends, at Montemorelos University in Montemorelos, Mexico, aware of this need, provides loving care for children from 43 days to 4 years of age. This nursery, dating back to 1994, has developed a successful model for helping children and their families develop a taste for vegetarian food and healthful eating.

My Little Friends has tapped the expertise of professionals of the university's School of Health Sciences to develop a healthful program for children attending the center and to monitor the well-being of each child.

Mexico ranks first in the world in childhood obesity.* With this in mind, the diet at My Little Friends promotes the development of an ideal weight. Of the 145 children enrolled in 2013, five were overweight when admitted, but they all reached their ideal weight in

less than eight months. Another child who was underweight when he came to the center also attained his ideal weight.

Rocio Velázquez, R.N., the founding director of My Little Friends, and Icela García, a registered dietician with 17 years of experience, are in charge of the diet promoted by the center. They share their success secrets.

Rocio, how do you develop a taste for healthful eating in children when they are still babies?

Rocio: It is very important to develop healthful eating habits in early childhood. When babies are six months of age, they are able to start eating a variety of vegetables and fruits, and this helps them develop a taste for healthful food and balanced nutrition. We know that food preferences develop at a very early age and influence our dietary tastes throughout life. Since the children eat breakfast and lunch at our center, they have many opportunities to develop good eating habits.

How do you know the taste of healthful food transcends the years of early childhood?

Rocio: We have the testimony of

many parents. Often, when we meet parents and alumni in downtown Montemorelos, they express gratitude for the childcare services. What they remember most is the diet, especially the variety of vegetables. Parents speak of the “trees” (as we call broccoli in kindergarten) and how their children—now grown up—continue to eat fruits and vegetables even though some other family members do not. To consolidate these positive tastes and habits, we serve seasonal fruits and vegetables grown locally. Also, to awaken parents' interest in a healthful diet, we exhibit trays with the two meals children eat at the center. When parents and grandparents come to pick up their kids, they look at the tray and ask questions about the foods, and often ask for the recipes so they can make these dishes at home.

At the parent-teacher conferences, we offer recipes. Almost all parents are interested in vegetarian dishes. We know that many of the mothers use our recipes because they tell us when they were able to get good results or if they need further assistance to prepare a dish.

B Y R A Q U E L B . K O R N I E J C Z U K

Many parents ask us to recommend menu ideas for snacks or dinner meals that are not offered at the nursery. We provide them with healthful nutrition and attractive choices, teaching them that a kindergarten child at the nursery consumes 700 to 800 calories a day out of the 1,200 to 1,300 required. We strongly recommend offering fruits for snacks because we have noticed that parents do not regard fruit as a priority in selecting food.

Is the timing of meals important?

Rocío: Yes. Children arrive at the nursery between 7:00 and 7:30 a.m. We have breakfast at 8:00 a.m. and lunch at 12:30. When children leave the center at

4:00 p.m., they are hungry. Thus, we suggest that parents offer a healthful, nutritive snack and a lighter dinner later. It is better for children's health to go to bed early and let their stomachs rest.

Icela, how do you choose the menu for children?

Icela: The starting point for menu selection is the amount of nutrients needed daily for each age. We select a balanced diet that combines the proper amounts of nutrients and calories, carbohydrates, proteins and fats, vitamins and minerals. We take into consideration the typical Mexican dishes in order to plan a menu that goes along with the food preferences of our popu-

lation. For example, for breakfast we offer milk, a main dish, a side dish, a seasonal fruit, and bread or tortillas. For lunch, there will be soup, a main dish, a side dish, salad, bread or tortillas, and a healthful dessert. The amount of food (portion) is calculated according to the child's age.

Do you take into account the appearance of the food?

Icela: Yes, it is important for the dish to be visually appealing, to smell and taste appetizing, and to have the proper consistency. Cold and hot foods are kept at the right temperature. We serve the food in pieces so the child can learn to use eating utensils. We make sure



Registered dietitian Icela García teaches Sara Lilia Gaona to use eating utensils. Also shown: Miranda Vazquez.

that the dish combines pleasing colors that contrast attractively on the plate and attract the child's attention.

How do children react to new foods? Is it possible to promote a taste for new items?

Icela: The first time we introduce a new food to children, we ask them to try it once. Just once. Many children say they do not like new food, although they have not yet tried it. Once they have tried it, we say: "Now that was good, wasn't it?" If they say they don't like the food, we say: "OK, you don't have to eat it now. We'll try it again some other time."

We measure the acceptance of a new food by the amount of leftovers. If the dish is not attractive, we change its appearance. For instance, boiled cauliflower was not accepted at first. Then we made cauliflower patties in red sauce. This new presentation went over well.

We know that we must be patient in introducing new foods. Usually, we serve a new dish three or four times before deciding that it requires a new appearance. Some children, who tend to reject everything new, require more patience from their teacher. When children insist that they do not like one or two food items, we respect their individuality and replace that food with an equivalent. The important thing is that they do not develop food phobia. Understanding the reason for rejection makes it easier to find a solution. Rejection may be due to the consistency of the food. A different way of preparing the dish can solve the problem.

At the same time, it is important for the child to understand that there must be a balance between the development of habits and discipline and the acceptance of food. To successfully teach healthful eating habits, adults must be the ones who choose what a little child eats. Children may choose the amount of food they eat. Adults also determine eating times. The center's feeding system helps children who have trouble accepting food or eating schedules through the use of positive peer pres-



Daniel Orozco Piedra enjoys lunch at the My Little Friends childcare center.

sure. Children who join our childcare center want to feel accepted into their new social group, and thus are eager to learn the routines and relationships. Parents recognize that the diet promoted by the center makes a positive impact on the health of their children during the time spent at the center and at home.

And what about children who eat slowly?

Icela: We provide sufficient time for each child to eat. Some kids eat faster, some slower. The slower ones receive more attention from the teacher at the table during the training time. Teachers help these children enjoy the rhythm of

eating, concentrate on the task, and develop a similar pace to that of their classmates seated at the same table.

Do you also teach them table manners?

Icela: Of course! This is an increasingly important issue because many children do not eat at the table in their home, and some parents do not teach their children table manners. . . .

At the center, we teach children to always keep the table clean. If something spills, it should be cleaned up immediately.

Children are taught to sit quietly,

wait until everyone at the table has finished eating to get up, and to use napkins and utensils appropriate for their age. One-year-old children use spoons. Two-year-olds use spoons and forks, and 3-year-olds use spoons, forks, and infant knives. Children learn to use the appropriate utensils, to be properly seated, and to keep their plate right in front of them.

Four parents volunteered to join a conversation on the impact of My Little Friends childcare center on their families: Ana Julia Gaona, Sandra Aguilera,

and Francisco and Laura Silva.

Ana Julia: I have a child, Aldo, who is 2-and-a-half years old. He has attended this nursery since he was 3 months old. In our home, we used to eat a lot of meat. We did not consider a meal complete without meat. But, since Aldo began attending the nursery, he learned that there are many healthy and tasty foods we did not know: broccoli, beets, lentils, chickpeas, et cetera. I wanted to try every new food my child was learning to eat. Now, we eat very little meat at home, and we eat lots of vegetables.

Sandra: I have 14-month-old twins: Gerardo and Violet. They were born premature, and Violet was severely underweight. They started attending the nursery when they were 5 months old, and at that time Violet was still underweight. The nursery's diet allowed her to reach her normal weight very quickly.

Francisco: We have two girls, Paola and Maria Fernanda, 2 and 4 years old. The older one is enrolled at My Little Friends. At home, we used to eat meat at every meal, but soon after she began attending the childcare center, Paola told us she didn't want to eat meat anymore. She wanted vegetables and fruit.

Laura: When I was cooking rice, my daughter asked me what vegetables I was going to add because at the childcare center, she gets rice with veggies. I learned from her that rice with vegetables is a much more balanced dish.

How did you learn to prepare new dishes?

Ana Julia: Every day, I look at the menu displayed at the childcare center to see what my child will eat that day. By observing the menus there, I learned new meal options: a stew of chickpeas, bean salad with tomatoes. . . . Some friends have given me healthful recipes to try at home. Also, I visit health-food stores. I learned from the childcare center to eat oats, amaranth, and many other nutritious vegetables, grains, and seeds.

Sandra: I did not know how to cook. Icela, the childcare nutritionist, agreed to explain how to prepare the food they served at the center. One of my children is lactose intolerant. He learned to drink soymilk. Now everyone in the house drinks soymilk.

Laura: I thought that a healthful vegetarian diet would be more expensive than a non-vegetarian diet, but I soon realized I was wrong. With a small change, such as drinking water instead of soft drinks, we save a lot of money every month! I also learned to cook by looking at the menus displayed at the center, and trying the recipes they supplied. I am sure that we will keep this new diet at home. It is much more healthful than the one we had before!



The childcare center's registered dietician, Icela García (left), and director, Rocio Velazquez, discuss the menu for the week.



The My Little Friends childcare center's registered dietician (left) discusses the week's menu with Sandra Aguilara, the mother of one of the children enrolled in the center.

Do you feel better as a result of eating a more healthful diet?

Ana Julia: I feel lighter when eating a vegetarian diet. I used to be very fond of pork rinds. It is a very harmful food. After trying a vegetarian diet, I cannot go back to my previous diet. I guess my body rejects so much meat.

Sandra: I have lost 20 pounds by adopting at home the diet suggested at My Little Friends. Now I eat vegetables. I didn't used to drink water, only soft drinks. Now I drink water every day. Before sending my children to the childcare center, we used to eat only junk food, meat, and chocolates. That was the normal diet of our whole family. But since my little twins started to eat healthful meals at the childcare center, I have tried nutritional dishes at home for my family. Now everyone enjoys a healthful diet.

Francisco: My family feels much

better. Before sending my child to My Little Friends, my family drank four liters of cola per day. But one day, my daughter said that cola drinks were bad for our health. I did not know that! Recently, in my medical checkup, I noticed my cholesterol and high blood pressure had decreased. The doctor told me that my new diet is cleaning my body and helping my health.

This dialogue shows that even before little children can speak, they can recognize what food they like or dislike, and can influence the family. Food tastes are a personal matter, but they can be educated. My Little Friends is making a difference in the health of the children, families, and the community. ✍



Raquel B. Korniejczuk, Ph.D., serves as the Academic Vice President of Montemorelos University, México. Her professional interests include

Biblical foundations of education, curriculum development, and the impact of both on student learning. The My Little Friends childcare center belongs to Montemorelos University and is an educational service for the local community. Dr. Korniejczuk conducted this interview for THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION.

* UNICEF, *Salud y nutrición* (n.d.): <http://www.unicef.org/mexico/spanish/17047.htm>. Accessed February 26, 2015.