Nutrition during first 1,000 days of life — when the baby is in the mother’s womb through his or her second birthday — sets the stage for all the years and decades ahead. Historically, the focus has been on providing adequate nutrients and calories to give the baby the best opportunity for health, growth and brain development.

**What We Know Now:**
Researchers now know that early nutrition affects the ways in which a child’s genes behave and also plays a role in the development of obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, allergies, some types of cancers, and more. Furthermore, nutrition during these earliest days impacts dietary habits, which in turn affects the child’s risk of chronic disease for years down the line. The foods we feed our young children greatly influence what they will eat later in life. What's more, according to Jose Saavedra, MD, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Gastroenterology and Nutrition at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and the Global Chief Medical Officer of Nestle SA, by age 2, a child’s body mass index can predict his or her risk of future overweight and obesity. Understandably, researchers and healthcare professionals also place importance on avoiding excess calories during the first 1,000 days of life.

According to the Feeding Infants and Toddlers Study, most parents think that their children eat enough fruits and vegetables. Yet data from that study show that depending on the age, about 30-38% of older infants and toddlers consumed no vegetables on a given day and 20-35% consumed no fruit.

**What Parents Can Do:**
Moms and dads can help their infants and toddlers get proper nutrition and learn healthful eating patterns. Dr. Saavedra recommends the following…

• Breastfeed when possible.
• Be responsive to your child’s hunger cues. In other words, it’s better to pour out some bottled breast milk or formula than to encourage overeating. Don’t push food on children.
• Model good eating behaviors.
• Don’t use food to lull your children to sleep or to entertain them.
• Offer fruits and vegetables often.
• Limit sweets and sweetened beverages.

**Here’s the bottom line:** What and how we feed our infants and toddlers sets the stage for their future eating habits and health. That said, remember, it’s never too late to make changes.

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