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Julie A. Albrecht

University of Nebraska--Lincoln, jalbrecht1@unl.edu

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Food Safety for Babysitters

Julie A. Albrecht, Extension Food Specialist

Babysitting may be the first job you ever have. It may also be the most important job you ever have.

It's your job to keep the kids safe. You have to know how to handle accidents, fire, and strange phone calls. You also need to know how to handle food. A baby is so tiny even a little bit of unsafe food could make it very sick. Young children are also vulnerable to foodborne illness.

So take a minute to review these tips. Then you can guard those soft, cuddly youngsters you keep from foodborne illnesses as well as other problems.

Keeping a Baby

A number of childcare experts think you should be at least 13 to sit with an infant. They also suggest you visit the baby's house first before you keep the baby by yourself.

Go over everything you need to know with the parent — how to hold, feed and burp the baby, the sleep schedule, where supplies are kept and how to change diapers. Is there a medical condition you should know about? Learn where items are located in the kitchen and how to operate the microwave.

Request a list of important numbers by the phone. Get the parent's and a neighbor's number. You, of course, know to call "911" or the local emergency number for fire and police.

Baby's Bottle

Older babies can drink a bottle from the refrigerator. Younger babies (6 months and under) need lukewarm food. To warm a bottle:

- Heat milk in a disposable insert in a plastic bottle by holding it under hot tap water a few minutes. Test the temperature of the milk by putting several drops of milk on your wrist. At body temperature — when you can barely feel the temperature of the drop on your skin — it's ready for the baby. If stored breast milk is used, ask the mother how to handle it.

- Be careful warming hard plastic or glass bottles in the microwave. Hot spots can occur in microwaved bottles and cause burns in the baby's mouth. To heat in the microwave, remove the cap and nipple. Heat a refrigerated 8-ounce bottle 30 seconds on HIGH. Let stand for a minute. Replace nipple, shake and test on your wrist as suggested above.
- Milk, formula or food that is left out of the refrigerator for 2 or more hours should be discarded.
- A bottle should not be left in the crib with an older child. Baby could pick up the bottle and drink it over a number of hours.

Discard leftover milk from an unfinished bottle. Microorganisms from baby may contaminate the milk which may cause foodborne illness in baby.

Baby Food

Check that the safety button in the lid of a glass jar of baby food is down and that the lid "pops" when you open it. Don't use the food otherwise. Don't use food from jars with chipped glass or rusty lids either. Before opening a baby food jar, wipe cap with a clean cloth. The cap will be easier to remove if you run warm tap water over it.

Baby foods can be served cold, at room temperature or heated. To heat baby foods:

- Spoon a portion from the jar into a microwave dish. Don't put the jar in the microwave! A small serving should heat on HIGH in 8 seconds. Stir and let stand a short time. Caution: Stir and taste for lukewarm temperature before feeding the baby, otherwise "hot spots" in the food could burn the baby's mouth. Use a clean spoon to feed baby.
- Do not heat baby meats or meat sticks in the microwave. They heat unevenly.

Leftovers, Snacks for Older Kids

To microwave leftovers or a simple meal:

- Use microwave dishes only and set the timer a little short of the time recommended. You can always microwave more to finish heating, but you can't save ruined food.
- If cooking a microwave food from the package, follow directions carefully.
- Stir food half-way through the heating time to even out the temperature.
- Use hot pad holders when removing dishes from the microwave. Let popcorn sit for a few minutes before opening. Open popcorn and remove plastic wrap on other items so steam escapes away from your face and hands.
- Let food stand to cool for about 5 minutes before serving. Cut into cheese, hotdogs or filled pasta shells before eating. The fillings can get very hot.

Kitchen "Musts"

- Make sure you and the children wash your hands before and after handling food. Always wash hands after changing baby's diaper or helping children in the bathroom.
- Keep kitchen and dishes as clean as possible. Put cold foods back in the refrigerator as soon as you've used them.
- Healthy eating - Fresh fruits and vegetables are better for the kids...and for you...than sweet, salty or greasy foods.
- Foods that can choke - Don't give young children hard candy, nuts or popcorn. Cut hotdogs, grapes and other solid foods into small pieces to serve.
- Never leave infants or children alone while eating.

Reference:

Feeding Babies and Young Children — A Teen Sitter's Guide to Food Safety. *Food News for Consumers*, Summer 1992.

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