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Series on Fitness & Nutrition for Families

5 Tips for Building Healthy Eating Habits from an Early Age

By Jennifer Kerr, MS, RD

You control the options. You decide which foods to buy and when to serve them. Of course children will ask their parents for less nutritious foods, however adults are in charge of which foods come into the home. If your child's favorite snack is not very nutritious, you may still buy it once in a while.



Children may choose what they will eat and whether they eat. Children must have some say regarding their food intake. From the selections you offer, let them choose what to eat and how much of it they want. Say "would you like milk or water?" instead of "what do you want to drink?" You may have to repeat the choices a few times in the beginning, but they will get use to with having limits to their choices. As children grow up it is important to allow them more freedom of choice. Ask them to come up with some ideas for a meal and snack and discuss the choices together. This teaches your children to make good choices on their own; it prepares them for the "real world" where the choices are limitless.

Get out of the "clean-plate club." Allow children to stop eating when they feel they have eaten enough; when they are satiated. Many of today's adults grew up abiding by the clean-plate rule. This approach does not help children listen to their internal cues for hunger and satiety. When children notice and respond to their feelings of fullness, they are less likely to overeat and become overweight.

For many parents it may be difficult to tell whether your child is truly hungry soon after a meal or just interested in scoring some snacks. It is perfectly normal for young children to need to eat after dinner. Their small bodies need small frequent feedings. As a parent, you know your child best, but again, establish which snacks are acceptable. Be careful that the language you use does not make healthy snacks seem like a punishment for not finishing dinner. Your child may require a regularly scheduled feeding a few hours after a meal. When you hear "I'm hungry," you can respond with, "ok, snack time is in _____ minutes, think about whether you want _____ or _____." You could always offer to reheat a small portion of what was offered for dinner. If your child is restricting his/her intake at dinner in order to munch on less nutritious snacks later, he/she will soon realize that these foods are not an option every evening. Your child will choose to either eat from what you offering as a snack, or start eating enough at mealtime.

Write your own kids' menu. Kids' menus at most restaurants are very limited and often lack healthy options. When eating out, let your children try new foods; they may surprise you with their willingness to experiment. You can start by letting them try a little of what you order. Food preferences are developed early in life, so it is important to offer a wide variety of foods. At home, you may need to serve a new food several times for a child to accept it (as it becomes familiar). Do not force a child to eat, but encourage a few bites of any new food. Offer new foods alongside familiar foods they enjoy.

Food is not a reward. Occasional sweets are fine; however, when dessert is the reward for eating a meal, children begin to place more value on the sweets than the healthful foods. Stay neutral about foods. When foods are used to reward children or to show affection, they will begin using food to deal with stress or other emotions. Offer hugs, praise, and other positive attention as reward.