

Tips for Healthy Children

Eating habits are learned behaviors; they're not intuitive, so what your children learn to eat at home early in life sticks with them well into adulthood. Today we are disconnected from our food sources in a way that is unprecedented in human history. Fewer and fewer Americans cook meals from scratch because it's easier and faster to throw a frozen dinner in the oven or grab something from a fast food restaurant on the way home from work. And the guerilla marketing foisted upon us by fast and processed food companies isn't helping. Most parents know that their kids are under continuous assault by corporate food advertising but feel frustrated by and even powerless against it. In reality, a few simple tools combined with a mantra of variety, moderation and balance will provide you with all you need to ensure the long-term nutritional health of your child.

1. Be a good role model.

Most of the parents we know complain that their children refuse to eat healthfully and come to us in search of magic recipes that will put an end to mealtime madness. The real problem most often lies with the parents, not the kids. Most of us are so accustomed to eating out, grabbing a fast food something or other on a lunch break, and buying prepared foods in the grocery store that we don't even know what good food is anymore. We can't line our cabinets with packaged cereals and sodas and expect our kids to eat like they were raised on a commune in rural Vermont. In order to be good role models we must educate ourselves first and then practice what we preach.

2. Take your kids shopping with you.

Unfortunately we don't all live near farms or farmer's markets, so it's not easy for us or our children to feel a connection with good, whole (unprocessed) foods. One way to help them learn is to make a point to take them grocery shopping with you. Of course it's probably easier to go alone when there's someone at home to watch them or they're at school, but it's important for them to see foods in their raw states so they can explore and ask questions. Take them when you're not in a hurry and spend a lot of time in the aisles that contain unprocessed foods—the produce, meat, and fish departments, for example. If your child appears to be interested in a certain type of fruit or vegetable encourage him or her to explore that item, don't just assume that your child won't like it. Take it home and let him try it so he can make his own decisions.

3. Be flexible!

Remember, anything in moderation is okay. Of course if you eat doughnuts in moderation, followed by potato chips in moderation and soda in moderation, it is no longer healthy. Having a cookie every day and balancing it with healthy foods is a good practice of moderation. While we always want to make the healthiest choices for our children's bodies, a special treat once a week or even once a day won't do any damage. On the contrary, it will help make eating a more enjoyable experience and will help your child build a good relationship with food.

4. Make mealtime special

There are all sorts of fun things we can do to make mealtime special. First and foremost, sit down and enjoy your food. Take time to savor flavors. Children should never eat while walking around. We understand that some young children have difficulty sitting for the entire meal. In those cases we recommend allowing the child to get up once or twice, while encouraging the child to sit, not stand, at the table when he or she comes back to eat. For children who are able to understand, explain to them that mealtimes are special family times and it is important to the family that everyone sits down to eat and talk together. Make a ritual out of dinner and give everyone a special task—maybe even let each child have one night a week to plan and help make dinner. Have the kids set the table. Cloth napkins and real glasses set a more formal tone and are better for the environment. Candles aren't just for adult dining—they can set a calming tone for the meal and will show kids that mealtime is special. Make a point not to allow mealtimes to degenerate into family argument time.

5. Don't be a short order cook

Ever find yourself making one meal for the adults in the house and another for the kids (or even one for each kid)? Children take their time warming up to new things and if you keep giving them the old stand-bys they're not going to branch out and explore new foods. Be patient. Most research says that it takes an average of 10 to 12 times before a child will try a new food unless they are involved in cooking and gardening projects. Learning about food and cooking in an active way helps breed a sense of culinary adventure. Make the same dinner for everyone in the family while taking some time to put some foods on the plate that your children like, then add something new. If they don't touch it don't worry about it and definitely don't make an argument out of it. Try again the next week and again the following week. Eventually they'll surprise you by at least tasting that new food.

6. Don't buy into marketing for kids

Kids don't need frozen chicken nuggets, French fries, macaroni and cheese, and pizza to keep them happy. And those kinds of foods certainly don't make for healthy children. Avoid preprocessed foods at all costs and start talking to your children early in their lives about what constitutes a good diet and why it's important for them to avoid foods like the ones mentioned above. Even a three year old can grasp why sodas aren't good for you and why we don't eat foods with lots of fat every day at every meal. Highly processed foods are loaded with chemicals, synthetic fats, additives, artificial sweeteners, and food colorings. Kids love brightly colored foods because advertising (kids see 10,000 commercials a year!) trains them to believe that those foods are kid foods. Bright blue seems to be a favorite—everything from beverages to applesauce can be bought in a frightening shade of blue.

Faced with the child who thinks he might implode without that blue applesauce hold your ground and look for an organic applesauce instead while explaining that both taste the same but one has things added to it that aren't healthful. If you have a particularly stubborn child do a double blind taste test to prove your point.

7. Don't use food as rewards, bribes, or punishments

Okay, okay, we know, M&Ms have a long history as the greatest bribe candy on earth for potty training—even the most health conscious mom will break down and try M&Ms during that oh-so-critical stage of development. Don't give in! Stickers work just as well and you won't be setting a precedent for using food as a bribe or reward as your child gets older. Sure, it's okay to take the kids out for ice cream or frozen yogurt after a good (or even a bad) soccer game, just don't use it as an incentive for a good game. On the flip side, don't punish children for not eating certain foods—it will only foster a negative relationship between you and your children, not to mention your children and food.

8. Let kids help in the kitchen

Encourage your children to help out in the kitchen. Even a two year old can help peel potatoes or carrots. For smaller children, invest in a stool, like The Learning Tower (<http://www.heirloomwoodentoys.com>), that allows your children to safely reach the kitchen counter so they can see what you're doing, or if you have room, set up a work station at your child's height so she can participate without having to stand on tiptoes to do so. Taller children may only need a small wooden step stool to reach a comfortable height. If a child is interested in doing more in the kitchen, don't automatically assume that she can't or that the task will be too dangerous. Know your child's limits and help her achieve success by providing support and encouragement in a safe setting. Kids love eating food they created. Involve your child in the cooking or snack preparation and they will be more likely to eat new foods, including fruits and vegetables.

9. Love and accept your child no matter what!

Love and accept your child at any weight, size or shape. During childhood growth is unpredictable at best. It comes in spurts and a once skinny child can suddenly plump up while his height catches up with his weight. There's a lot of pressure in our society to be thin and you might be tempted to put your child on a diet during a growth spurt, but that won't be helpful and may even cause emotional and physical damage. Instead, help your child maintain his weight until his height catches up. The best way to do that is to teach good healthy eating habits.

10. Make sure your child eats breakfast

It's the most important meal of the day, and it should ideally be the largest meal of the day to get your child off on the right foot. After ten to twelve hours with no food it's important to refuel the engines. If they don't eat in the morning they'll be tired and unable to concentrate in school before lunch. It's essential that children jumpstart their metabolism in the morning so their bodies don't enter starvation mode, which might later cause them to experience difficulty maintaining a healthy body weight.

Some children need to practice eating breakfast. We recommend starting small and working to a bigger meal if you're having trouble getting your child to eat breakfast. For most children breakfast should be around 500 calories and should be nutritionally balanced. Starting kids off with sugar first thing in morning is not ideal. This gives a quick burst of energy and then leaves your child drained. Breakfast should always include a source of protein, some healthy fats, carbohydrates (whole grains are best), and vitamins and minerals. A great breakfast for a family with time in the morning would be

two eggs, whole wheat toast, fruit, or hot whole grain cereal and whole grain low-fat granola and/or 100% fruit juice. A family with less time might choose a hardboiled egg to go with a slice or two of whole grain toast, or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on whole wheat bread.

11. Encourage your children to move their bodies

A good diet is only part of the equation. In order to stay healthy our bodies need exercise. Studies have shown that vigorous exercise boosts the immune system and increases our ability to concentrate. Help your children find physical activities they enjoy and encourage them to get outside to play as often as possible.

Identifying age-appropriate activities will make exercise more fun. Children between the ages of 2 and 5 enjoy simple activities—running, jumping, kicking a ball, riding a tricycle (a bicycle as they get closer to age five), and even using their imagination to trot and gallop like a horse or hop like a kangaroo. Backyard play is best for this age group, while for kids between age 5 and 8 organized, non-competitive sports can be extremely rewarding. Rollerskating and ice skating can be introduced at this age. Encourage your 5- to 8-year old to explore a wide variety of sports and physical activities to allow her to begin to discover her likes and dislikes. Children ages 9 and up enjoy competitive team sports, but puberty can make many teens feel self-conscious and awkward, especially around their peers. Help them find activities, like yoga, strength training, jogging, and aerobic dancing, that can be done as part of a group or solo. Every once in a while a family hike makes a great change of pace for all ages.

As with eating, a parent's good example can make the difference for a child. Make sure exercise is a part of your daily routine as well.

12. Remember that you are the boss

Adults need to set the boundaries for kids because left to their own devices they may choose salty and sugary processed foods over fresh, healthier choices. Children actually do much better when they know that they have boundaries and limits. Listen to your child, but set clear limits and guide them towards the healthier option.