

Parenting Pointers

Parenting Tips on Healthy Eating Habits and Kids!

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When all the fun of Halloween is over, the ghosts and goblins have been put away for another year, and the candy has all been eaten upit's a great time to remind children of healthy eating and exercise habits. Habits developed at a young age stick with us! Nutrition affects children's ability to learn, develop and stay healthy throughout life.

Obesity is one of the most serious health problems facing Americans today, including children. Obesity rates for children and adolescents have more than doubled in the last three decades ~ nearly one-third of all children and teens are overweight. An overweight adolescent has a 70% chance of becoming an obese adult. Obese children have an increased risk of high blood pressure, premature heart attacks and diabetes. Childhood obesity often leads to a lifetime of poor eating habits and low self-esteem.

Parents often have common misconceptions about children and eating habits. Many of us grew up under the house rule of "eat everything on your plate!" Forcing a child to finish everything on their plate is not a productive way to encourage healthy eating. Children will overeat to please parents, avoid punishment or get away from the table. Allowing children to listen to inner hunger cues trains them to let their appetite control the quantity of food eaten. Requiring that they eat a little of everything helps develop a healthy balance. Some parents have a "No Sweets" rule; however children will get their hands on sweets, and denying them access will only make them more determined! Allowing children limited sweets at specified and reasonable times will lessen the appeal to obsess over sweets. Contrary to popular belief, sugar does not cause hyperactivity, but it can contribute to excess weight gain and tooth decay. Foods high in sugar also tend to be high in calories and fat, and low in nutrients. Noticeable mood or behavior changes after consuming sugary foods may be related to food additives, allergies or caffeine.

Here are some helpful tips for encouraging healthy eating habits in kids:

- Sharing meals together provides valuable family time and offers structure to a busy day, giving family members a chance to listen and support each other.
- Be a good role model. Try new foods and involve children in food preparation.
- Buy a variety of healthy foods including fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- Set specific times for meals and snacks. Children usually need snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Limit sugary, high fat snacks.
- Encourage children to drink plenty of water and milk, not empty calorie fruit drinks and pop.
- Avoid adding excessive salt to foods.
- Be adventurous! Have a "new food night" each week and include children in choosing new foods to try.
- Be creative! Add shredded fruits and vegetables to pancakes, muffins or burgers. Let your child invent new snacks from healthful ingredients.

Bottom line: Kids can understand that what we put in our bodies matters! When we give our bodies the proper fuel, we are able to think more clearly, have more energy and perform better in school and athletics. Healthy eating makes healthier and happier kids!

Information in this article was provided by *Estes Valley investment in Childhood Success (EVICS)* with permission from *Partners in Parenting, Colorado Family Education, Resource & Training, CSU, Cooperative Extension*.

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