

## Raising Healthy Eaters

Raising children is a difficult task. Parents are responsible for the foundation of so many milestones. One of the most important parental responsibilities is supporting the development of their children's relationship with food. But for many, this is not an easy task.

The environment in which a child learns to eat has a tremendous impact on how that child develops as an eater. Furthermore, the environment includes not only the types of foods that are available, but also the method and model of feeding.

Hectic schedules, a dislike for or inability to cook, and a distrust of food (too many carbohydrates, chemicals, etc.) may affect the way families approach meals and have led to the following habits, which may contribute to eating issues:

- » **Constant Snacking.** With most families being “on the go,” casual feeding has become the norm. This is feeding initiated by the child, who also determines what he eats, and typically is comprised of snack foods often made with refined grains. This constant snacking, or constant drinking (often of sugar-sweetened beverages), can fill the child up, leaving them with no appetite for meals.
- » **Parental-Controlled Feeding.** When parents restrict or force their child's eating, destructive patterns can develop. Rigidly withholding certain foods or continuously monitoring the amount of food a child eats can backfire by creating food obsessions and lead to hiding food. This behavior stems from a child feeling insecure about when they will eat next, thus setting the child up to overindulge whenever there is an opportunity.

Overeating can occur when children are forced to finish meals even after they are full. Being part of the “clean plate” or “happy plate” club was/is a popular parental tactic, but this strategy



teaches children to ignore their bodies' natural signs of satiation.

Some parents want their children to finish their entire meal or eat all their “healthy” foods before they can get dessert. This could encourage children to view certain foods as bad, and it elevates the status of less nutritive sweets over foods that are more nutritive. In addition, children are unlikely to grow to love the foods they were forced to eat. Ultimately, the main goal should be helping children learn to love healthy foods.

- » **Emotionally Enforced Feeding.** Avoid using food as a reward, to soothe your child, to alleviate their boredom, or as a means to distract or punish.

### How to Raise a Healthy Eater

The first step in raising a healthy eater is to establish one ground rule developed by Ellyn Satter, a registered dietitian and family therapist with over 50 years of clinical, research, and therapeutic experience in helping families raise healthy eaters. Satter calls this ground rule “The Division of Responsibility in Feeding”: Parents are responsible for what, when, and where their children eat, and children are responsible

for how much they eat of the food that's provided, which can range from consuming none of it to every morsel on the plate. That's correct; it is okay if your child does not eat at a meal. It's a balance of leading and then letting go. The best determinant of healthy eating is healthy growth. If the child is growing consistently, as determined by his pediatrician, regardless of how his eating is perceived, then his food intake is probably just fine.

How you feed your children is often more important in raising a healthy eater than what you feed your children. If you want your children to eat healthfully, serve healthy options from MyPlate. At all meals, including snacks, limit calorically-dense foods, not because they're "junk" but because they are "sometimes foods" and make us feel too full to enjoy other nutrient-dense foods.

### Helpful Tips:

- » Schedule up to three meals and two snacks every day, and avoid letting kids eat in between these times.
- » When a child refuses food, keep your responses calm: "Don't like it? That's OK."
- » Avoid the urge to be a short-order cook; this enables children to refuse the food they're given.

- » Always have at least one item a child is familiar with on his plate.
- » Make the healthy choice the easy choice. For example, offer cut up fruits and veggies and make whole grain snacks available.
- » Studies suggest it can take 10 to 15 exposures of a new food before a child will accept it. The best response for kids saying they don't like a food is: "That's okay. You don't have to eat it."
- » Keep portion sizes small. Big servings can overwhelm tiny eaters, but allow children to eat more if they wish.
- » Engage your child's curiosity during the meal. Talk about the shapes, colors, taste, and texture.
- » Try keeping foods separate on the plate. Your child may respond well to individual tastes and textures rather than mixed servings.
- » If a child refuses to eat anything, remind yourself that it's ok for her to skip a meal. Just let her know the next time she can eat will be at the next scheduled meal/snack time.
- » Have fun with food. Involve kids in menu planning (ask for their input on broccoli vs. carrots, etc.), grocery shopping (pick out a new



food to prepare and try), and meal preparation. Maybe name a recipe after them. Try growing a garden together.

- » Utilize positive peer pressure by inviting “good” eaters over for meals.
- » Cultivate hunger by playing outside before dinner or go for a walk. Also, consider only serving water before meals as kids can fill up on milk and juice.

What about dessert? Withholding desserts until children finish their meals can teach overeating. Withholding can also unintentionally send the message that dessert is the only “good” part of the meal being served.

The best strategy of all, however, is to set a good example. Your child will learn the most about eating by watching what and how you eat. It’s important to prioritize your meals by making time to plan, shop, and prepare meals and also having a designated place to eat meals. Remember Ellyn Satter’s ground rule for “The Division of Responsibility in Feeding”: Parents are responsible for what, when, and where their children eat, and children are responsible for how much they eat of the food that’s provided.

Above all, remember that family mealtime is about connecting with your loved ones. Children were born wanting to eat, and how you feed them and what you feed yourself will greatly influence what they eat. Developing a healthy eating pattern depends on routine, habits, and what happens on a consistent basis.

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