



Fostering Healthy Eating Habits In Children

If kids had their way, pizza, chicken fingers and french fries would make up a significant portion of their diets. But parents know they must make kids' culinary choices for them so youngsters get all of the vitamins and nutrients they need to grow up strong and healthy.

Parents also tend to know how difficult it can be to convince kids to embrace healthy eating. Healthy eating habits can help kids live healthier lives and perform better in the classroom while setting them up for a lifetime of making the right choices at mealtime. Though encouraging kids to eat healthy may not always be easy, the following are a few tips for parents hoping to foster healthy eating habits in their children.

* **Stick to a schedule.** Parents should establish a regular eating schedule, for both meals and snacks, so kids learn the importance of not skipping meals. Kids who learn to eat at regular intervals are more likely to continue doing so as they grow older. When kids stick to a meal schedule, they are less likely to overeat and they're likely to have more energy throughout the day, which should help them stay attentive at school and be more engaged in their extracurricular activities.

* **Involve kids** when choosing the menu. Kids might be more excited about eating healthy when you involve them in choosing the menu. Invite them along on



trips to the grocery store and allow them to choose one of their favorite foods for the meal in exchange for eating the healthy fare you have chosen. Parents may end up eating a lot of side dishes of macaroni and cheese, but their youngsters will also end up eating their vegetables.

* **Plan healthy desserts.** Dessert is often considered an unhealthy indulgence, but there's plenty of nutritious desserts that are so delicious kids likely will not realize they're eating healthy. A dessert of fresh fruit and a small serving of yogurt can provide the same post-meal refreshment as ice cream or cake, but it does so with much fewer calories and a lot more nutrients and vitamins. What's more, kids will come to look at dessert as a chance to eat fresh fruits instead of an opportunity to load up on ice cream or other, less healthy alternatives.

* **Serve healthy portions.** Sometimes it's not just what is on the plate but how much

is on the plate that can be healthy or unhealthy. When doling out portions for the family, create healthy portions so kids are not encouraged to overeat. Kids who grow up eating healthy portions are more likely to continue doing so into adulthood.

Overeating is one of the culprits behind being overweight and obese, so kids who learn to control their portions are much less likely to overeat and gain excess weight.

* **Don't reward kids with food.** Some parents try to reward youngsters with food, allowing kids to indulge in unhealthy fare in acknowledgement of a good report card or something else kids should be proud of. But using food as a reward is an unhealthy eating habit that can lead to problems down the road as kids become adults responsible for their own eating habits.

* **Set a positive example.** Kids are more likely to eat healthy when mom and dad are healthy eaters. If your first choice at snack time is to reach for a bag of potato chips, then don't be surprised when your kids opt for chips over healthier fare like a piece of fruit. "Do as I say, not as I do" is a tough sell to youngsters when it comes to their eating habits, so parents should set a positive example for their kids by ensuring their own diets are healthy.

Tips For Quick Weeknight Meals

Enjoying a meal together on a weeknight is a goal for many families. But adults often find themselves pressed for time on weeknights, and that time crunch can make it difficult to enjoy a homecooked meal.

But time is not the only thing getting in the way of family meals. Be it after school activities, long commutes or late hours at the office, many things can make it difficult for a family to sit down and enjoy a meal together. The National Center on Addiction and Substance

Abuse notes that family dinners are one of the most effective ways for parents to engage in the lives of their children. Studies have also shown that families who eat together tend to eat healthier, as parents can more effectively monitor their kids' diets, including whether or not their youngsters are getting enough fruits and vegetables, when they are dining together.

While it may not be feasible for parents and kids to scale back their busy schedules, there are steps parents can take to make weeknight meal preparation quicker. By shortening the time it takes to make meals on weeknights, families might be able to sit down to dinner together more often.

* **Plan ahead.** The most effective way to make more time for family meals is to plan ahead. Planning meals on the fly encourages everyone to fend for themselves, making it difficult for families to enjoy nutritious meals they can eat together. Plan for the coming week's meals on the weekend, when you can survey your pantry and make a trip to the grocery store if need be. Planning ahead also allows you to prepare certain parts of a meal in advance, which will save you time on busy weeknights.

* **Make cold meals.** Dinner does not have



be served hot, and cold meals often take less time to prepare. Consider serving salad or sandwiches on those nights when you are especially pressed for time. When serving sandwiches, serve them on whole grain bread to add some nutritional value to the meal.

* **Turn breakfast into dinner.** There are no laws regarding what qualifies as dinner and what does not, so families without much time on their hands on a weeknight can turn breakfast into dinner. Eggs are both quick and easy to prepare, and they can be served alongside toast and grapefruit. When making omelets for dinner, add some spinach or another vegetable to make the meal more nutritious.

* **Lean on seafood more often.** Seafood can be healthy and delicious, but that's not the only reason it's an ally to time-strapped families. Seafood should not take much time to cook, as even those dishes that take more time than simpler dishes like sauteed shrimp will still take less than 30 minutes to complete. That's significantly less time than meals in which beef, pork or poultry is the main entree.

* **Leftovers aren't just for lunch.** Leftovers are often relegated to lunch, but extras from a meal cooked over the weekend can be used as a quick go-to meal on a hectic weeknight. If the family enjoyed the meal the first time around, there's no reason they won't enjoy it again. When eating leftovers for dinner, make sure the leftovers are fresh, but try to avoid serving leftovers the night after they were initially cooked.

Enjoy meals as a family is a great way for families to eat healthy and stay engaged in one another's lives. And even families with hectic schedules can employ a few tricks to make dining together more convenient.

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