

How To Help Your Child Choose Foods Wisely

By: Rosanne Rust, MS, RD, LDN

"By modeling healthy living for a children, adults not only improve their own personal wellness, but help set the stage for the whole family's lifestyle habits," states Mary Kay Sawyer-Morse, PhD, RD, a professional speaker, author and co-owner of a Texas-based company that provides nutrition and health in-services and seminars to diverse industries.

This is sage advice for any parent concerned about their young child's diet or exercise habits. Nutritionally speaking, there are so many concerns for children today: Obesity, a sedentary lifestyle, poor nutrient intakes, eating disorders and an increase in the risk of early disease onset are just some of them. In spite of the health profession's attempt to offer advice and conduct scientifically significant research which helps justify a healthy lifestyle, the impact these efforts have on a child are only as good as the adults who listen to and apply the information.



All issues in relation to children fall in the hands of adult caregivers. If a five-year-old child is overweight, that child is helpless unless his or her parent or guardian takes control. The adult can set limits to food and beverage intake and provides outlets for physical activity, all the while assuring a positive self-esteem. This is no easy task. On the other hand, a "picky eater" who gets to demand exactly what he or she wants to eat for lunch or dinner every day will unlikely broaden his or her "food horizons" as long as he knows mom or dad is going to give in and provide that special food.

Parents should consider these tips when modifying their child's food consumption:

- Be a positive role model for your child. Show them that you can fit physical activity into your busy life, and they can too.
- Set reasonable goals and limits for your child, as you want them to succeed. Remember that limits or rules need to be appropriate for the child's age and understanding of food.
- Make it clear to the child that you expect him or her to eat foods from each food group every day. Your job is to provide healthy foods. The child's job is to eat it. Offer often, but don't force.
- Remember that children ages 7-10 should be getting 3 servings from the milk group, 5 servings of fruits and vegetables, 5-6 servings of grains, and 2 servings from the meat/bean group daily. Limit sweets.



- Having a variety of food available, including dessert, teaches the child portion control. If you offer cake for dessert, let the child know that one piece is enough if they ask for seconds. Save the rest for tomorrow.
- Allowing a child one to two small servings of a treat item daily is okay as long as the minimum servings from the essential five food groups is met (one treat serving would equal: two small cookies or 1-ounce potato chips or one fun-size candy bar).
- Limit soda pop, lemonade or fruit drinks. "Milk with meals" is a good guideline.
- Don't completely ban junk food, especially for school age children. Children will not only resent you, but they could develop cravings from what they view as deprivation and will eat every potato chip in sight whenever they get the chance.
- It's important to live the habits and lifestyle you want your child to practice, as children learn best from modeling. Set limits but don't be too restrictive. Eat well and exercise. Teach your children how to enjoy a healthy diet and lifestyle.

When it comes to a child's nutrition intake and problems associated with it, parenting has a lot to do with it. Just as with any restriction a parent may set for a child (limiting television or computer time, setting curfews, limiting the types of movies a child may watch, setting a bedtime for a child), limits or rules need to be set for how a young child is to deal with food. Children learn best by modeling so it's important to live the habits and lifestyle you want your child to practice.



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