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How to Help Your Kids Become Healthier Eaters

Cheryl Fenton **writer**

Growing up too fast has always been an issue with kids. But today, it's not necessarily in the way they dress, the language they use, or the movies they watch. It's their health.

Once considered a "grownup" issue, obesity is a growing problem with our children. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 16 percent of children (over 9 million) six- to 19-years-old are overweight or obese—a number that has tripled since 1980. The American Heart Association offers us more alarming news: over 10 percent of children between the ages of two and five are overweight, up from seven percent in 1994. It's this rise in childhood obesity that is also linked to a dramatic increase in the number of kids suffering from Type II Diabetes, previously called "adult-onset diabetes."

It seems that in our super-sized world and with our hectic schedules, we sometimes put more thought into how to fill up quickly than into how to fill up correctly. Quick-fix sugary juice boxes replace real pieces of fruit. Fast-food burgers are ordered up instead of healthy home-cooked meals. Milk gives way to soda (one can of which has over one and a half times the USDA daily recommendation for added sugar). Although Boston recently ranked last on a list of America's 50 most obese cities on Forbes.com, our work isn't done. It's important to start our little ones off the right way, before bad eating habits take hold. Instilling a positive respect for food will serve up a healthy lifelong relationship.

"Feeding is parenting. They're connected. If you can't help with the feeding part, it will be difficult to do the parenting part," says Debbie Sargent Donovan, RD, a pediatric nutritionist in Food and Nutrition Services at Newton-Wellesley Hospital. With 30 years of experience in the field, Donovan works with children and parents to encourage healthy attitudes about eating.

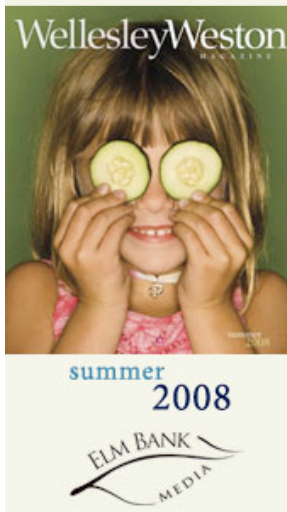
Experts at the Pediatric Nutrition Practice Group of the American Dietetic Association (ADA) agree, saying that "caregivers must not only provide quality foods to meet nutrient needs but also must establish a good eating environment, so that children can develop positive lifelong eating habits." Turn your dining room into a fun place, instead of a battleground, with these expert tips on raising a healthier eater.

Goodies are Good...Sometimes.

We've all had that hand-in-the-cookie jar look on our face, probably because our little hand was in the cookie jar when mom or dad came around the corner. After all, a forbidden fruit is a desired one (especially when it's dipped in chocolate). The more you make treats taboo, the more your kids will crave them, going out of their way to sneak a few here and there.

Don't be afraid to hand out the sweet stuff every so often. "You have to bring in goodies for goodies' sake," says Donovan. "[Children] need to be able to have them, but they need to know that it's a treat." But always give goodies in good taste. Don't use favorite foods as a bribe, for example, in return for something like a better report card. Instead, mix treats with special occasions. Let your children eat cupcakes and chips at a sleepover or cheesy nachos and Coke at the big game.

Be a Role Model



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Make sure that your little apple doesn't fall from the tree by showing off your own good eating habits. Eat as a family, always at the table and always together. Donovan acknowledges that being a role model sometimes includes fighting your own food demons. If there's a veggie you aren't too fond of, chances are it isn't on your shopping list. But your aversion to broccoli, peas or lima beans shouldn't keep your child from trying (and maybe even liking) it.

And don't think your child doesn't notice that his or her plate is heaped full of turnips while yours doesn't have a single one. "Don't make a big deal about it," suggests Donovan. "Put a little on your plate and then suffer through the spoonful."

The "One Bite" Compromise

You can lead a kid to dinner, but you can't make them eat. According to the Pediatric Manual of Clinical Dietetics from the ADA, parents should be reminded that they're responsible for what the child is offered to eat, and where and when it's presented, but the child is responsible for how much food he or she eats.

"There's a division in responsibility in feeding," says Donovan. "The parents are in charge of the what, when and where of feeding. The children are responsible for the how much and whether to eat or not."

That takes some of the pressure off, but not 100 percent of it. "You want to make food pleasurable," says Donovan. "When you force food, you set them up for problems in the future, such as potential eating disorders. Never force-feed children."

Instead, she suggests a compromise. Ask them to please try the food in question. Take a tiny bite. After that, if they don't like it, then they are free and clear.

Involve Your Kids

As Donovan aptly puts it, "If they are invested, they are more interested." During her time working with the WIC program, she found growing root vegetables in class was the perfect way to keep the kids interested. By involving your children in age-appropriate ways, you'll get them excited about foods.

"Let them be involved in the planning of the meals," she suggests. "If they're older, let them wash the fruits or help you cut the vegetables."

You can also teach them about label reading, servings sizes (see sidebar) and even what's important to eat (at their tender age, Donovan stresses protein, calcium and fiber). "When your children can count to five, you can teach them about dietary fiber. For kids, it's their age plus five grams per day," she says. "Once they are a little older, teach them how to read calcium. They can take the percentage listed, drop the percent sign and add a zero. Toddlers should have 500 to 800 milligrams per day."

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

In the end, you do have control over what your children eat. If it's not in the house, it won't be a temptation. Save the cookies and chips for special occasions, and make healthy foods more easily accessible. Cut up veggies and keep them in a bowl in the fridge. Put colorful fruit in a bowl on the table for a quick snack.

"If the kid has an option of blueberries or cantaloupe, those are good choices," says Donovan. "But if they have blueberries or chips, which one do you think they will choose?"

How Much is Just Enough?

Experts suggest serving child-sized portions, and let your child ask for more. Here are a few suggestions from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for your young children ages two to six:

- 1/3 to 1/2 cup of frozen veggies
- 1 or 2 little cooked broccoli spears
- 1/2 cup of tomato sauce
- 5 to 7 cooked baby carrots
- 1/3 to 1/2 cup of melon
- 5 to 7 strawberries
- 1/2 cup of applesauce
- 1 small tangerin
- 1/3 to 1/2 cup of frozen or fresh berries
- 1 cup low-fat yogurt or nonfat milk
- 1/3 to 1/2 cup of macaroni-and-cheese, rice, pasta or mashed potatoes
- 2 ounces hamburger
- 1/4 cup ground meat, browned and drained
- 1 or 2 chicken drumsticks

Strive for Five

Wellesley's kids involved in good health

An exciting idea born from a grant given to Wellesley and Needham, Strive for Five Townwide encourages school-aged children and their families to eat healthier. A collaboration between the Wellesley Fitness and Health Department and the Wellesley Board of Health, this initiative is based on the National Cancer Institute recommendation of five or more daily servings of fruits or vegetables.

As members of the "Strive for Five Club," kids take nutrition into their own hands with charts for keeping track of whether they reach this healthy goal.

Every month, a fruit and vegetable is chosen, and with pen in hand, kids jot down how many

they have eaten on the provided Strive for Five calendars. Fun facts and nutritional information on each "fruit or vegetable of the month" are also provided, as well as recipes that make adding these important servings to their diet fun and easy.

"The kids feel a sense of accomplishment when they mark their calendars and track their progress," says Cheryl Lefman, Health Communication Specialist at the Wellesley Health Department. At the end of the academic year prizes are awarded to those children that have successfully strived for five.

"By raising awareness about Strive for Five," she continues, "kids and their families have an opportunity to reinforce patterns and behaviors that contribute to their overall health and wellness."

NOTE: For more information on putting your child on the right track for healthy eating, visit www.healthiergeneration.org or www.Mypyramid.gov.