

Healthier, Happy Lives Blog

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At Stanford Medicine Children's Health, we're improving lives every day. Read our stories and ideas for making yours a healthier, happy life, too.

Categories

Back-to-School
Celebrating Volunteers
Community Outreach
Construction Updates
COVID-19
Design
Diabetes
Doctors
Events
Family-Centered Care
Fertility
Healthy Eating
Heart Center
Interesting Things
Mental Health
Newborn
Nurses
Obstetrics
Patient Stories
Pediatric Technology
Pediatrics
Pregnancy
Prenatal
Research and Innovation
Safety Tips
Support
Sustainability
Trauma
World-Class Care

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< Previous

Next >



How to Encourage Your Children to Have Healthy Eating Habits

December 9, 2022 | *Davia Gray*

HEALTHY EATING, PEDIATRICS.



As a parent and caregiver, you play an important role in making healthy choices for your children and in teaching them to make healthy choices on their own. With so many mixed messages surrounding nutrition, it's a task that can feel overwhelming. Venus Kalami, MNSP, RD, CSP, a clinical pediatric dietitian and nutritionist at Stanford Medicine Children's Health, breaks down some simple things you can do to help your family establish healthy eating habits.

Focus on the joy of food

According to Kalami, our focus should be on having a healthy relationship with food, rather than on restriction. She encourages parents to reframe their mindset around food. Due in part to the influence of marketing and diet culture (in a nutshell, the focus of everyone being on a diet and wanting to lose weight), there is a lot of false information about nutrition that we can unknowingly pass on to our kids. By peeling this away and embracing the enjoyment of a wide variety of foods, you can help your family cultivate healthy habits.

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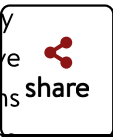
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“As a society, our tendency is to focus on the things to restrict, like sweet treats or salty snacks, and it’s not healthy for our minds to be wired so negatively and fearfully around food,” she explained. “But if we focus on balance, variety, and a healthy relationship with food, without giving all of this extra negative attention to the sweet and salty snacks, then we can have a healthy diet and lifestyle, with some flexibility for treats. ... By keeping it about balance, positivity, and joy, we help break the cycle and build a generation of healthy and happy eaters.”

Make time for breakfast

A long night of sleep can be restorative, but all those hours of fasting and repairing the body can also mean lower energy stores in the morning, especially for growing children. Breakfast refuels and replenishes their bodies so they have energy to play and learn. Kalami suggests offering a balanced meal that contains protein, carbohydrates, a healthy fat, and a fruit and/or vegetable. It could be as simple as avocado toast with an egg, tofu soup with noodles, or options like Greek yogurt with fruit and oatmeal.



“Having breakfast is particularly important in younger children, who are going through more frequent periods of rapid growth,” Kalami said. “But truthfully, breakfast is still going to be important for all age groups, adults included, as we are all dynamically experiencing different shifts and changes in our body, and starting the day off with a nutritious and fueling breakfast helps set everyone up for success, by giving us fuel, consistent energy levels, and a more stable mood.”

Whenever possible, Kalami suggests, have a family meal at the table. Eating together has been linked to many positive health outcomes. However, hot or cold, or even on the go, there’s no wrong way to have breakfast. “Breakfast doesn’t have to be the very first thing in the morning, and it doesn’t even have to happen at home,” Kalami said. “Sometimes life is so hectic that breakfast happens when the child gets to school, and that’s totally OK—perfect doesn’t need to be the enemy of good.”

Help your child listen to their body

While you may feel tempted to beg your child to eat one more bite of peas, mealtime offers a great opportunity to allow children to listen to their body’s instincts. Kalami said that most children do a good job of self-regulating their hunger and appetite. This means they will naturally eat the right amount of food. So, instead of tracking calories or asking for “just one more bite,” parents can look for other cues to make sure their kids are eating enough.

“Fortunately, there are more holistic indicators to tell us if a child is eating adequately, such as their energy, ability to focus, endurance and stamina, mood stability, going to the bathroom regularly, and growing and gaining consistently, to name a few,” she said. “If one or some of these domains are ‘off,’ then that tips providers off to investigate a little further to make sure a child is eating and drinking enough.”

Keep your child hydrated

Getting kids to drink enough water can be challenging. When kids play hard or participate in sports, they may be too distracted to stop and get a drink to stay hydrated. For kids who just aren’t interested in drinking water, Kalami recommends finding fun ways to promote hydration.

“To get them interested in drinking more water, I like to encourage getting a fun and cute water bottle that they’ll enjoy drinking from,” she said. “A rebranding, like ‘sparkly mint water’ instead of ‘water with added mint leaves,’ can also help pique their curiosity and wonder, which helps motivate them to drink water more consistently.” And if it’s developmentally appropriate, explaining how hydrating well can help them “crush” their sports performance (or whatever other activity they enjoy) is often highly motivating!

Foster your child’s independence

One of the best ways to reinforce healthy eating habits in children is to nurture their independence. According to Kalami, it makes them more likely to engage in and continue healthy eating and lifestyle habits. Even toddlers can help with meal prep by washing produce, tearing up lettuce, or just standing and watching happenings of the kitchen in a safe way. As children get older, they can be more involved with selecting recipes, helping with grocery shopping, and preparing meals.

“It can be a huge help to sit down together once or twice a week to softly brainstorm some ideas, grocery shop together, and assemble meals ahead of time,” Kalami said. “Grocery shopping is a wonderful opportunity and activity of regular life where kids can build curiosity and an interest in food, outside of the kitchen and away from the dinner table, that lends to an overall positive experience.”

She recommends setting loving boundaries by gently guiding children to make good choices, such as picking a fruit, a protein, and one “fun” food, so there is a balance of fun and nutrition—while also helping the child build an understanding of how to structure balanced meals to fuel all of their fun.

Support kids with medical diets

For children with food allergies, intolerances, or special medical diets, healthy eating and a good relationship with food is still possible with some advance planning and communication. The biggest challenges often come when eating outside of the home, such as at school, at parties, and when celebrating holidays.

“Communicate with others, plan ahead, do your research, have a backup plan, and do your best. ... As you gain more practice, you become more adept at navigating all of the social settings that involve food,” Kalami said. “The goal is to participate in everyday life as much as possible! Ultimately, the purpose of these medical diets is to keep the child healthy and sound, so that they can live their fullest lives—and not live their lives around their diet.”

Connect with your village

Developing nurturing eating habits in childhood can provide lifelong benefits for our children. While it can feel like a lot of work, you don’t have to do it alone. Kalami encourages families to reach out for support from a professional if they have questions about nutrition. “You don’t ever have to wait until you have a food-related problem to see a dietitian,” she said. “Dietitians can help with not only navigating the logistics of nutrition, diet, medical dietary restrictions, supplements, and more, but they can also help with facilitating behavior change toward healthy and wholesome diet and lifestyle practices.”



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