



Teaching Children about Health Eating: What's Important?

As we learn more about the impact of nutrition on our health, we also realize how vital it is that we teach our children about healthy eating. From finishing their vegetables as a toddler to making healthy choices in the school lunch line, we want our children to understand the connection between what they eat right now and their energy, their feelings, their weight, and their future health. We also want to avoid quibbling over every carrot and candy bar. Here are steps that parents can take to teach their children the important things about eating healthy.

- **Keep it Peaceful**

What our child eats or doesn't eat at the dinner table can easily become a power struggle trigger. When we pressure our child to eat something he does not want – even when we know that it is good for him – he may resist even more. Eating then becomes more about resisting and less about health and enjoyment. To avoid power struggling over food, remind yourself that your job is simply to present healthy meals to your family. Commit to keeping mealtime peaceful.

Encourage your child to sample new foods, and be willing to sample new foods yourself. Make a "Food Contract" with your family, agreeing that everyone is willing to sample new foods by taking at least one bite.

- **Keep the Connection of Food to Feelings and Energy**

Maintain an ongoing casual conversation with your child about the impact of the food we eat on how we feel and on how much energy we have on tap for the things we want to do. If you notice that your child becomes cranky, lethargic, jumpy or scattered after eating sugar, processed foods or foods with artificial colors, ask him how he is feeling. Ask him to notice his energy levels. Ask your child to notice how he feels after eating

raw fruit or a healthy, balanced lunch. Include the questions, “How do you want to feel?” and “How much energy do you want?” If your child complains of feeling tired, make the food connection. When was his last meal and what did he eat? Following a healthy snack, ask him to check out his new energy level.

- **Keep it Varied**

Offer an array of different foods throughout the week, including new foods, and offer new foods many times. If your child says he does not like a new food, continue to offer it over several months – up to twenty times – so that it becomes familiar and he has more opportunities to sample it. Offer the new food prepared in a variety of ways. Add some adventure by preparing food from different cultures and countries.

- **Keep Health His Responsibility**

Our health is our responsibility. As our children get older, their health becomes something for them to own. For example, we made an early connection between dairy consumption and ear infections with our daughter. When she was younger, we limited her dairy consumption. As an eleven-year-old, she now monitors her intake of dairy, knowing if she eats or drinks it more than a few times a week, she will most likely get sick.

Children feel very valuable when they help prepare meals. Together, plan menus for the week and shop for ingredients. Include menus for school lunches in your planning, and let your child begin to make his own lunch when age-appropriate.

Children’s cookbooks offer recipes for children as young as four. Mollie Katzen is the author of many beautifully illustrated and healthy cookbooks for children, including Salad People, Honest Pretzels, and Pretend Soup. American Girl also offers cookbooks for young people.

- **Keep it Real and Balanced**

No matter how healthy we eat home, our child will probably have a piece of cake at a birthday party or drink a soda with a friend. If we keep it in balance – avoiding “outlawing” all soft drinks or criminalizing cake – our children will keep it in balance, too. As vegetarians, we have walked that tightrope. We have made

eating meat a choice for our daughter and have requested that she choose vegetarian meals at school. Loving Mexican food, she once opted to eat tacos with ground beef for lunch in the cafeteria. She ended up coming home with a stomach ache. By avoiding the extreme of "you may never eat meat," she took the responsibility for her food choices, we avoided power struggles over food, and she was clearly aware of the food-feeling connection.

We also recommend [Juice Plus](#), as does Dr. William Sears. Juice Plus is fruits and vegetables in capsule or gummy form. It is not a replacement for fresh fruits and vegetables, and when your child is taking Juice Plus, it is a great back up for those foods he passes by. Studies have also found that children who take Juice Plus begin to eat more fruits and vegetables, so it is a win-win on many levels. For more, please visit www.BeWellJP.com.

Bon appétit!

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