Encouraging Healthy Habits

Tips for Parents/Caregivers

Raising healthy children can be challenging for parents who are struggling to balance family life around hectic schedules, stretched budgets and constant distractions! This presentation is a quick review of the tips and techniques that have been shown to be effective. Raising healthy children is challenging but doing so can be a lot easier if you consider some of these tried-and-true suggestions.

Parental Do’s and Don’ts:

When it comes to raising “healthy eaters” there are two approaches that are sure to fail:

1. One is when parents don’t assume enough responsibility. Allowing children to eat whatever or whenever they want results in disastrous eating habits. Children simply don’t have enough experience or knowledge to make sound decisions about food choices until they mature. Children must be shown how to make wise lifestyle decisions.

2. Paradoxically, children raised by parents who are overly restrictive, tend to harbor equally disastrous eating habits, and may even develop dangerous eating disorders.

Eating is (and should be) a pleasure. Families who sit down together to eat tend to have significantly better nutrition. Meals should be pleasant. Discuss the day’s events and activities, but don’t use meal time to lecture, argue or punish. Encourage peaceable discussion. Don’t scold, bargain, beg or threaten children to eat—or not eat. No “short-order” cooking. Everyone eats the same menu. Make sure every family member is comfortable. Small children may need booster seats. Turn off the TV or videos and remove toys, games, cell phones or other “distractions.” Enjoy the meal and the conversation.

Leading by Example

The most powerful way to teach children about healthy eating is to eat a variety of wholesome foods yourself. Lead by example. Serve a variety of foods from the basic food groups, and allow children to decide if, or how much, they want to eat. Deciding WHAT foods are going to be served is the caregiver’s job. Asking for input, such as allowing children to choose which type of cheese or which side dish to serve can be very helpful. Most children enjoy participating in (age-appropriate) food preparation. Familiarity breeds acceptance. Children who are routinely exposed to donuts and chips will learn to like donuts and chips. Children who are routinely exposed to fruit, vegetables, lean meats, dairy and whole grains naturally grow-up accepting “healthy” foods as “normal.” Likewise, children who witness their parents engaging in physical activities (such as going for a walk or riding a bicycle) are more likely to mimic “active behavior.” Active parents tend to have active children. Know too, that it doesn’t really matter if the caregiver “looks athletic”—what matters to the child is witnessing activity—regardless of body shape or size.

When

Offering meals and snacks on a schedule is important. Children who are raised in homes where meals are completely unpredictable don’t learn to regulate their appetite properly. Serving meals and snacks in a predictable manner reassures children to trust their body. They learn to recognize feelings of hunger or fullness which enables them to eat when they are hungry and stop eating when they are full. Families, who allow
everyone to eat whenever they want, tend to have nutritionally poor diets. The term “food insecurity” is often used to describe situations where food availability is erratic. Children who grow up in homes where access to food is restricted may adopt a “get-it-while-the-gettin’s-good” style of eating. They literally overeat whenever the opportunity presents itself for fear that the next meal or snack may not be forthcoming. Conversely, children who are offered meals and snacks on a fairly routine schedule learn to trust their instincts—eating more only if they are hungry, and less (or not at all) when they feel full.

Moderation
Moderation is learned. It’s important for parents to (purposefully) serve “fun” foods—like cookies, candy, or fries just because they taste terrific. Relax! As long as frivolous foods aren’t offered too often—a few indulgences won’t rock the nutrition boat! More crucially—doing so teaches children about moderation. Eating cookies (or other less-than-healthy food) once-in-awhile is enjoyable. Children need to know that “everyday” foods (like milk, fruit and vegetables) need to be included every day for their body to grow strong and healthy. It’s okay to eat some treats—just not every day. Attempting to “ban” specific foods doesn’t work in the long run. Eventually, children will become independent and the plan can backfire! Children raised in overly restrictive environments may (intentionally) eat the “banned” food in retaliation. Worse yet—they may rebel against eating wholesome foods and even develop an “all or nothing” mentality, where they can fall prey to obsessive-compulsive behaviors like binge eating or yo-yo dieting.

“Diets” Aren’t for Children
Unlike adults—children are still growing. It’s very difficult (if not impossible) to calculate how much food a child needs on any given day. During periods of rapid growth—children need more energy (calories) than they do when growth slows down. As a general rule, boys hit their highest growth rates during their teen years, while girls experience rapid growth as they transition from adolescence to teens. Still, there are many factors that impact energy requirements. Physical activity plays an important role. Children who engage in sedentary hobbies need fewer calories. However, all children (sedentary or active) must secure important nutrients (such as calcium and iron) to promote health. It’s just as important for a thin person to eat healthy foods as it is for a heavier person. Even if a child’s BMI is “at risk” for becoming overweight—experts do not recommend putting children on “diets.” A better approach is to serve a variety of wholesome foods, and allow the child’s weight to normalize as they grow taller. Another key reason that restrictive diet regimens are not recommended is because children’s brains are still developing. Adolescent and teen brains function differently than adults when decision-making and problem-solving. Based on their brain development—teens are more likely to act on impulse and misinterpret social and emotional cues. Attempting to force restrictive diets during this phase of life can provoke negative attitudes about food or “secretive” eating behaviors.

An Ounce of Prevention
The good news is that making small changes during childhood can have profound results over time! Complicated “diet” regimens are unnecessary. Instead, focus on easy changes that can be maintained over time. For example, drinking water instead of sugary drinks can have a dramatic impact on body weight. Keeping a bowl of fresh fruit readily available for snacks and dessert is another simple, yet effective change. Activity-wise, start parking in the back of the lot and take the stairs instead of escalators or elevators. Walk around while you’re waiting on someone or something. Remember—demonstrating healthy habits makes a bigger impression on children and adolescents than anything you say. Raising healthy children is ultimately about unconditional love. Reassure them that every body is a good body. Eating healthfuly and staying active is important for everyone—mom, dad, grandparents, old people, young people, tall people, and short folks. Being healthy enables you to do the things that are really important to you—whether that’s singing in a choir, being a nurse or winning an Olympic gold.