

Helping your child develop healthy eating habits

by Marlene B. Schwartz, Ph.D.

Many parents feel they are caught in a bind when it comes to feeding their children. On the one hand, they want to make sure their children are eating lots of fruits and vegetables and only a few servings of sweets and high fat foods. On the other hand, many parents are afraid of being too restrictive because they are afraid of contributing to an eating disorder.

You know your child better than anyone, so in most cases, it makes sense to trust your instincts on how to best feed your child. With that said, knowing some of the research about how children develop eating habits can help you determine how to give your child the best chance of eating well.

Children are born liking the flavor of sugar and fat.

Historically, this made sense. During most times in history, humans faced a shortage of food, so liking the flavor of foods that were high in calories and energy was important for survival. Today, however, we are surrounded by these foods and the challenge is to eat less of them. We have old genes in a new environment.

Children are born disliking bitter flavors.

Again, this makes sense if you think about earlier times in history when it was important for children not to eat foods that might be poisonous or spoiled. Today, however, some of the healthiest foods we can eat (such as broccoli) have a bitter flavor.

Children like familiar foods and dislike new foods.

When babies reject a new food, it is called “neophobia.” This also served an important function because it kept children from eating toxic or non-food items.

If you put these biological facts together, the outcome is predictable. Most children are going to innately prefer ice cream to kale. Children will often reject new foods when you present them, with the exception of sweets.

This does not make it easy for parents to help their kids eat well. But it does show that kids who are labeled “picky” eaters are often within the normal range. There is research to suggest that overweight children are often described as having been picky eaters when they were little. It’s important not to just give up hope if your child rejects new foods and offer only the preferred foods. There is some good news to help you figure out how.

Children can learn to like new foods.

It takes up to 10 exposures to a new food for a child to learn to accept it. This may mean cleaning up 9 servings of vegetables off the floor, but it is important that parents don't give up when their child initially says "no" to a certain food.

Children prefer foods that are familiar, even if they aren't the sweetest or highest fat versions.

Research has found that if a child is used to a particular type of food prepared either plain, with salt, or sweetened, they will prefer it the way they are used to – even if it's the plain version.

A great example of this is how people feel about the type of milk they drink. Most people have picked one type of milk to buy and drink, and are consistent in their preference. Based on biological preferences, everyone should like whole milk better than 2% and 2% better than skim. But, this isn't the case. If you are used to drinking skim milk and someone hands you a glass of whole milk, you probably won't like it. Similarly, if your children grow up drinking skim milk and eating low fat versions of other dairy products (such as yogurt, cottage cheese, and other cheeses) chances are good that they will continue to prefer those foods into adulthood.

Another food item where there are multiple types available is breakfast cereal. Consider the fact that the least healthy cereals made by each cereal company are the very ones that they market aggressively to children. (Have you ever seen a cartoon character on a bran cereal?) Don't let the cereal companies convince you that kids will only eat sugared cereals – it's not true. Children can learn to like, and even prefer, healthier, low-sugar cereals if those are the ones they are used to eating.

Offer children choices; but make them healthy ones.

Many people believe that children have a built in mechanism that tells them to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full, and if parents can just stay out of the way, this will protect their child from becoming obese.

This is not true. Research has found that children can effectively self-regulate, but they do so only under certain conditions. These conditions are important to recognize. Children make good choices when they are primarily given healthy foods to choose from, and they are allowed to choose how much and which foods to eat.

No research has been done at this point on how well children self-regulate when the choices are super-sized fast food items, candy, sugared cereals and sugared soda. In fact, other research suggests that serving large portions, exposing children to numerous sweets and snack foods after they are full and drinking sugared soda can all contribute to eating too much and taking in too many calories.

Minimize struggles over food at home: Don't keep non-nutritious foods in the house.

When there is a cookie jar filled with cookies, some children will simply take one and then go on to do something else. Other children (who are probably the ones at risk for being overweight) have a hard time eating just one or two cookies and are likely to keep eating the cookies until they are gone.

The reason for this is still not known. It may be because some children find eating so pleasurable that it is more difficult to resist. It may be that some children don't have an effective biological mechanism in their body to tell them when to stop eating. But, whatever the reason, these children are at risk for overeating when highly palatable foods are available.

The most difficult situation is when children know that a desirable food is in the house, and they are told that can't eat it. This is a set up for constant struggles about food. The simplest solution is to keep those foods out of the house.

Which foods should be kept out? This is a decision each family must make for themselves, but here is a rule of thumb. Think about the foods you want your children to eat more of, such as fruit, vegetables, low fat dairy products. Those are the ones that should be readily available for snacks and served frequently at meals. Think about the foods you want your children to eat less of, such as candy, ice cream, salty snack foods and sugared cereal. Those are the ones that don't belong in your house.

You aren't saying your child can never eat another cupcake at a birthday party – but you are saying that this is not the way your family eats most of the time. There will be countless times when your child will be served high fat and high sugar foods outside the home, and it will be easier to feel OK about that when those are the exceptions and not the rule.

Make family dinners a priority.

Sitting down to dinner with the entire family may seem like a thing of the past. Today's families often have parents who need to work late, kids who have lots of activities after school and little time to prepare a meal.

It is hard – but it is also tremendously important for several reasons. First, it gives everyone in the family a chance to connect with each other and hear about each other's days. Second, it gives you a chance to be a role-model and make healthy food choices in front of your child. Third, it gives you a chance to see how your child is eating.

You do not want the dinner table to turn into a battleground. The best approach is to make a healthy meal with a few different food choices (a main dish, a couple side dishes) and put it on the table. Allow your children to serve themselves.

If your child insists that what you are serving is something he or she can't stand, allow a substitution, but make sure it's a healthy one. Be careful not to fall into the role of making different foods for each member of the family. You aren't running a restaurant.

Don't rely on food as a reward.

It's the most natural thing in the world to want to give your child a treat when he or she has made an important achievement. And all parents know that promising a treat ("if you are good, you can have a cookie") or threatening to take away a desired food ("cut that out, or no dessert tonight!") can be an incredibly effective strategy to control behavior.

Despite how effective food can be as a tool to control behavior or as a way to celebrate achievement, using food in this way is not a good idea. Research has found that adults who struggle with dieting and binge eating are more likely than others to remember their parents having rules about food where food was used to control their behavior.

Find other ways to celebrate special occasions.

In our culture, the most automatic way to celebrate holidays, special events, or birthdays is with food. It's hard to imagine a birthday party without a cake, and it's nearly impossible to imagine many holidays (such as Halloween, Easter, or Christmas) without candy. The candy companies have capitalized on this and often create versions of their candies that are packaged according to the theme of the holiday or season.

In this environment, it is hard to remember that there are other ways to celebrate achievements and reward good behavior. A recent study about Halloween found that when children were offered a choice between candy or a small toy, about half of them chose the toy rather than the candy. This study shows that children will not be as disappointed as we fear they will if we offer non-food treats at holidays.

What many children want more than anything is to spend time with their parents. When your child has something special to celebrate or has achieved something important, find non-food related activities you can do together. Be creative – you know your child and what he or she loves to do. Use that as your guide.

Encourage physical activity.

What we eat is just one part of the equation. The other is how much we move. No matter what size your child is, an increase in physical activity will be beneficial for health. There is substantial research evidence that level of fitness is just as important as weight in predicting how healthy someone is.

Children these days are signed up for many activities and it is sometimes difficult to choose which ones. There are only a few hours in each day that are open for scheduling, so seriously consider making physical after school activities a priority over other types of lessons or clubs. Doing something active every day is a great way to maximize health and fitness.

It's important to find physical activities that your child likes, and that will lead to increased self-esteem. For some kids competitive sports are great; for others, they are happier with non-competitive sports.

As with most things, your child is more likely to do something if you are doing it too. Try to make physical activity a regular part of your family's life. Walk to the store rather than drive. Have your child invite a friend to come with you to a playground or swimming pool. Plan weekend activities and vacations for your family that maximize the opportunity to do fun physical activities. Exercise doesn't have to be a chore; it can become part of your family's routine.

Turn off the TV

Study after study has found the same thing – there is a direct correlation between how overweight a child is and how many hours are spent in front of the TV.

Turning off the TV can be hard. As a parent, there are benefits to having your children in front of the TV. They are safe, entertained and usually pretty quiet. This makes it easier for stressed out parents to actually get necessary things done, like laundry, picking up the house or even making that healthy dinner!

It is hard, but it's really important. Talk with your children about which shows they feel they must watch, then make up a schedule and post it next to the TV. Turn the TV on for those shows and turn it off immediately afterwards.

Brainstorm with your kids about other things they can do when it's rainy, dark outside or there is no where to go. Even relatively sedentary activities, such as drawing, reading, and playing board games are an improvement over TV watching. Not only will your child be developing or practicing a skill (such a reading or drawing), but they are not watching commercials. The average child sees 10,000 food ads per year, and 95% of those are for one of four types of foods: soft drinks, fast food, sugared cereal and candy. These ads are working against all of your efforts, and the more you can limit your child's exposure to them, the better.

Be thoughtful about how you talk to your child about eating and weight.

Many parents worry that if they make too big a deal about what their child is eating or how much he or she weighs that they may cause an eating disorder. Remember, there are many, many more overweight children than children with eating disorders. Obesity is just as serious a medical issue and carries as much risk to a child's health as an eating disorder. If your child is overweight, you do need to talk to him or her about it, just as you would if your child had diabetes or a food allergy.

The main thing to remember at all times is not to be critical of your child's body. You want to make it clear to your child that you find him or her attractive at any size and

shape. You love your child no matter what, and your love and approval are not connected to how well or poorly he or she is doing at regulating eating and weight. Make it clear to your child that you aren't focusing on eating and weight because of appearance; you are focusing on it because it is linked to good health.

So, for example, don't say, "We don't eat ice cream because it will make us fat" or "We eat carrots because they help us become thin." Instead say, "We don't eat ice cream because it's not healthy for our bodies. We need to eat healthy foods so we have energy to do fun things like run and jump and play."

Be honest about your family's genetic vulnerability.

It is perfectly fine to tell your child, "In our family, we have genes that make it really important for us to take good care of our bodies. While your friends may be able to eat lots of junk food and never eat vegetables and seem perfectly healthy, that isn't the way it is for people in our family."

People are often afraid to talk to their children about eating and weight because they worry it will make them feel different or that there is something wrong with them. You can put it in the context of how everyone has things that are easy or hard for them, and have some things that they are naturally good at and other things that they have to work harder at.

Try to keep it in perspective.

Most people who have had WLS have spent a lifetime struggling with eating and weight, and it can be painful to see this same struggle in your children. The stigma of obesity in our society is strong and pervasive. Remember that for all of us, our size, how much, and what we eat are not the most important things about us.

Children need to know first and foremost that they are loved just as they are and for who they are. This can be especially important for an overweight child, who may be exposed to negative messages from others at school or in the community.

In the end, you cannot completely control what your child eats. And you most certainly cannot control what your child weighs. What you can do is create a home environment and experiences with food to increase the chances that your child will develop preferences for healthy foods that will last a lifetime.

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