

Tips for Getting Your Children to Eat Healthy

By Dr. Michael Danter, Pediatrician, Esse Health

Getting kids to eat healthy today is a battle in everyone's home. If you have picky eaters, mealtime can be a big challenge. Children have different tastes, and it makes mealtimes even harder when they avoid eating healthy foods like fruits and vegetables. Most children have a strong dislike of these types of foods, either due to their strong taste or different texture. As they get older, many children are bombarded by TV ads, Internet, and other media outlets enticing them into eating junk food. Here are some helpful tips to encourage your children to try new and more nutritious foods, develop better eating habits, and give you the satisfaction that you are helping them develop long-term healthy lifestyle changes.

An easy way to help kids eat healthy is to get them involved with picking out their favorite produce when you go to the grocery store. Encourage them to pick out one new fruit or vegetable to try. Let them pick out as many different colors as possible – making it a fun experience for them. That's what makes choosing candy so fun.

It all starts in the morning by eating a healthy breakfast. It is the most important meal of the day. Try to rid your cupboards of pre-packaged, sweetened cereals, pastries and snack bars. These convenient, easy-to-make meals contain loads of sugar. Instead, provide fresh fruits, whole-grain products, or scrambled eggs with cheese.

For snack time, most children like to eat sweets when looking in the kitchen. Reduce those high-calorie temptations of high-fat and high sugar or salty foods. Offer snacks like apple sauce, homemade oatmeal cookies with raisins or fruit snacks/dried fruit roll-ups made of 100 percent fruit to provide healthy low-sugar treats. Don't allow your children to grab anything out of the cabinet.

As for drinks, encourage your children to drink low fat or skim milk and water. Replace sugary fruit drinks with fresh fruit juice. You can cut a glass in half with water or serve the juice over ice to make it

last. Try to cut out sodas and replace with flavored waters as well, or adding a slice of fruit.

For lunch, try foods that are healthy and quick to make. Avoid fast foods and replace them with some of your kids' favorite foods using healthier ingredients, i.e. macaroni and cheese with whole wheat pasta, skim milk and low-fat cheese or replacing chicken nuggets with cut up chicken breasts rolled in egg, milk and crushed corn flakes and baked in the oven.

At dinner time, after a long, busy day at work, let your children help you plan the meal and prepare the food. Even if only stirring something in a bowl or pouring on a sauce, they will eat healthier and try something new if they are part of the process. Use the dinner menu as a time to find kid-favorite healthy meals that include fun foods. Focus on eating a 'rainbow of colors' throughout your meals. Kids like eating foods of various shapes and colors, and many fruits and veggies fall into these categories. Also try to present the food in an entertaining way – slicing up fruit into slices and arranging them in a picture. Have fun with your food – be creative and let your children be involved. When kids make their own meals, they are more likely to eat it.

Lastly, desserts are always a welcome "treat,"



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yet they can be healthy as well. Fruit smoothies are one of my daughter's favorites and she creates her own. Candy can be mixed with trail mix as well. Desserts do contain sugar, but can also provide other healthy benefits as well, as long as they are once in awhile, rather than the rule.

It is also okay to try to sneak in a healthy food once in awhile in regular meals along with sauces or dips and hope they do not notice them. As children get older, you can always ask them to try a bite of a new food at meals, just to explore new tastes and textures. Sometimes they find something they like right away or develop a liking for particular food overtime, like a vegetable served raw vs. cooked. Lastly, it is always important to be a good role model for your children. If you enjoy a physically active lifestyle and eat healthy, your children are more likely to follow your lead. Keeping a bowl of different fruits out in the open in the kitchen is one way to encourage your children to eat more fruit. If you have a garden, let your children help you plant and weed it. They are more likely to eat what they helped grow.

There is no great secret to healthy eating. Make eating fun for your children. Develop healthy habits by providing plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole-grain products. Include low-fat milk and dairy products, and choose lean meats, poultry, fish, lentils and beans for protein in reasonably sized portions. Encourage your children to drink lots of water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages. Limit sugar and saturated fat consumption. These small changes in their daily diet can lead to a lifetime of success.