

## Teaching and Relearning Healthy Eating Habits

Recently, I attended an educational symposium on keeping our children's hearts healthy. With obesity reaching epidemic proportions in the United States, the information discussed at the meeting seemed simple, yet not necessarily self evident. So here is my overview of the important points from the lecture, which I found enlightening in maintaining optimal health for both my children and myself!

First of all, as parents we need to lead by example. By age two years of age, children have a diet that is very similar to their parents. Two tablespoons of food in each of three food types (meat, vegetable, fruit) is all that needs to be consumed by a child between six and twelve months of age. By age two, frequently the nutrient rich vegetables and fruits given in the early days of eating are replaced by quick snacks made with processed carbohydrates and simple sugars. We need to get these out of our cabinets and out of the car. Kids these days eat a large number of calories given to them while sitting in their car seats. It is our job as parents to feed ourselves and our children before traveling and not give offer empty calories in order to keep everyone quiet in the car. Talk about why you eat healthy foods, why you exercise and why walking is an important way to get exercise.

Juice should be given in the morning with breakfast. Water and milk should be the default drinks at other times of the day. Apple juice is not a good form of nutrition. Juice should be limited to a half a cup a day. It is the job of the parent to teach the child table manners, and this includes teaching a child to use a cup by their first birthday. This will eliminate empty calories from juice. Children will spill fluids when learning how to drink from a cup. Practice will get help a child to master this important life skill. Expect a mess while teaching this skill, and you won't be disappointed. Eliminate the transitional sippee cup. Your child's health will benefit!

Be active together! This is true from toddlers through teenagers. In fact, teenage girls highly identify with their parent's degree of activity, most importantly their father. Exercise together, from simply taking a walk, to playing sports together.

More than 60% of parents think their children are picky eaters. Set aside a half an hour on a Sunday and plan the menu for the week. Let everyone have a say in the menu for the week. Stop being a short order cook. It may take 10-15 times (not two or three) for a food to be presented to a child before they will develop a taste for it. Continue to offer a variety of foods. Don't insist on cleaning the plate, but do insist on trying new food when presented. Texture and taste take time to develop. Be patient.

Cook together. Studies show that children are much more apt to eat what is presented, if they have a part in preparing the food. Do this when there is not a time crunch and everyone is rested. Children love to cook. Toddlers can help in measuring ingredients and stirring. Let young children use their burgeoning fine motor skills. Let school age children use their math skills in the kitchen. And teens can use this time to learn a life skill. Let them have a friend over when learning to cook and you might find this is a time for sharing other parts of your teens life. This is great quality time to spend together as a family. More than one adult in the kitchen can really ease the process, if several children are involved. Teaching a child to cook will require planning ahead, including having ingredients and supplies ready. Do some prep work (such as rinsing berries) and initially chose recipes with five or fewer ingredients. Step up the complexity once

everyone is aware of how the process works. A cooking disaster in the long run is not that big of a deal. Compliment your child on their work and loosen up on how the process goes.

Do not allow consuming food to have a significant emotional value. Food should not be a reward, but a social time in which food is consumed for fuel for the body.

If you do order out for pizza occasionally, consume a glass of water and a salad or fruit before the pizza arrives. This will lessen the amount of high fat calories consumed by eating pizza alone.

Finally, meals consumed at home contain 1/3 fewer calories on average than meals consumed eaten out of the home. That is more than 1 pound per week in calories, based on the average American diet. These tips can benefit you, even if you don't have a young family at home, but are looking for ways to consume healthier meals with fewer calories.

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