

## Attracting Your Child to Healthier Food

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There are some very simple steps that parents can take to assure their child of better nutrition. Much of what we want for our children: healthy bodies with less illness, ability to concentrate, better study skills, adept physical ability, can be aided with a wholesome diet. The first step is to remind ourselves that we are role models. If we are eating vital, wholesome foods such as whole grains, beans, fresh vegetables and fruit, our children will be more likely to follow suit. Sometimes this requires parents to negotiate a united purpose. If one parent offers celery stalks for snacks and the other scoots out to the ice cream store, the children get mixed messages and will lean toward the more stimulating food.

Parents not only need to be in sync, they have to be willing to set boundaries around food and eating habits. Just as you would not let a five-year-old choose when to go to bed, it is inappropriate to expect a young child to make a nutritious decision about what to eat for lunch. Children are affected by happy-looking packaging, entertaining advertisements and artificially colored ingredients in commercial foods. They do not have the knowledge or wisdom to overcome marketing ploys and make healthful choices. Parents need to make the decisions or offer simple, limited choices like offering an apple or an orange.

Assuming you want your child to eat well, what can you do to pave the path toward good eating habits?

### **Honor mealtimes**

Studies show that children who sit down to regular shared family meals have more emotional stability, do better in school and eat a wider variety of foods. With busy schedules you may not be able to get everyone together more than once a day, or even twice a week. Whatever you can manage, find times that work and keep them sacred.

### **Provide excellent choices**

If you don't want your child to eat something, don't buy it. Keep the cupboards and fridge stocked with things you can feel good about your child eating.

### **Announce that what's served is served**

Make only one meal for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Don't fall into being a short-order cook. If every dish of the meal you've prepared is rejected, allow the child to be excused from the table until the next meal. This may sound like tough love but if you keep this one simple rule you can avoid many parent-child battles.

### **Include a winner with every meal**

Most kids like foods like fresh fruit, applesauce, bread and butter, or potatoes. Whatever you choose for the meal, try to make sure there is something on the table that your child will like, even if it is just a side dish.

### **Refrain from using food to bribe, reward or punish**

Parents are prone to make desserts and sweets a reward if the child has been good or cooperated. Messages like this can eventually lead to eating disorders. If you must bribe, reward or punish use something other than food to encourage your child to do what you want.

### **Set clear rules about special treats and favorite “less-nutritious” meals**

Say you have a child who loves macaroni and cheese and will only eat macaroni and cheese. Don't deny total access, just set up when and how often you think it's healthy and reasonable to have it. Make it clear that we have macaroni and cheese on Friday nights. After awhile the standard will be set and the pleading will stop.

### **Create appealing presentations**

Some kids don't like their food mixed up or touching. They might try a sauce if it was on the side to dip into rather than smothering the dish. Salad might get an “ugh” but some cut up carrots, cucumbers and radishes will get eaten. Pay attention to how foods are put on the plate. Usually the simpler the better.

### **Set Boundaries**

Most picky eater problems are really about parents not wanting to set up any boundaries about food. As parents we find it difficult to let our children experience disappointment. Yet we know that learning how to face obstacles and adapt is how we learn to be resourceful. This simple truth applies to food. Be willing to set limits. Let your child face the disappointment of not eating ice cream when they are coming down with a cold, or not going to a fast-food restaurant two nights in a row. They will not only survive, they'll grow stronger.

There are many ways to enhance your child's love of good food starting when they are very very young. Serve babies freshly cooked vegetables and fruits that have been run through a blender rather than jarred baby food that is old, processed, and full of fillers. Start a garden in your yard or on your porch and let young children see how food grows. They will love foraging for snacks. Encourage your children to help you in the kitchen. Make them feel needed, useful and creative by involving them with meal preparation. Children will mirror your relationship with food. Let them see you shop, prepare and enjoy eating fabulous whole foods.

*To find out about the author, please see “About the Contributors” on pages 181-183.*