

## Healthy Eating for Children

What is healthy eating? Healthy eating means eating a variety of foods so that your child gets the nutrients (such as protein, carbohydrate, fat, vitamins, and minerals) he or she needs for normal growth. Your child can eat all types of food, as long as his or her weekly intake is balanced and varied. How much food is good for my child? From birth, children have an "internal hunger gauge" that signals how much food they need at a given time. Babies cry to let us know they're hungry. When they're full, they stop eating. Children continue this pattern as they grow; they eat as much or as little as their bodies need. When you are caring for a growing child, it may worry you to see your child take a few bites of food at dinner and then announce, "I'm full." Remember, that's your child's internal hunger gauge talking. Think about what your child ate during the entire week. It may have been more food yesterday and less food today. Chances are that the amount of food he or she ate balances out over the week. How can I help my child eat well and be healthy? Many parents worry that their child is either eating too much or too little. Perhaps your child only wants to eat one type of food—peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, for instance. One way to help your child eat well and help you worry less is to know what your job is and what your child's job is when it comes to eating. Some food experts call this the division of responsibility. Your job is to offer nutritious food choices at meals and snack times. You decide the what, where, and when of eating. Your child's job is to choose how much he or she will eat of the foods you serve. Your child decides how much or even whether to eat. If this idea is new to you, it may take a little time for both you and your child to adjust. In time, your child will learn that he or she will be allowed to eat as little or as much as he or she wants at each meal and snack. This will encourage your child to trust his or her internal hunger gauge. You can help support your child's healthy eating habits and physical activity level by:

- Making healthy food choices for your own meals. Children notice the choices you make and follow your example.
- Setting limits on your child's daily television and computer time. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a limit of 1 to 2 hours' screen time per day.<sup>2</sup> Sit down with your child and plan out how he or she will use this time allowance.
- Making physical activity a part of your family's daily life. Take a walk after dinner. Consider "charging"; 15 minutes of active play for every 15 minutes of TV time.
- Eating together as a family as often as possible. Keep family meals pleasant and positive. Avoid making comments about the amount or type of food your child eats. Pressure to eat actually reduces children's acceptance of new or different foods.
- Taking your child to all recommended well child checkups. You can use this time to discuss your child's growth rate, activity level, and eating habits with a health professional.

What causes poor eating habits? Poor eating habits can develop in otherwise healthy children for several reasons.

- Available food choices. If candy and soft drinks are always available, most children will choose these foods rather than a more nutritious snack. But forbidding these choices can make your child want them even more. You can include some less-nutritious foods as part of your child's meals so that he or she learns to enjoy them along with other foods. Although in the division of responsibility it is your child's job to decide how much of a food he or she will eat at a meal, it is okay to limit dessert to one serving. It is your responsibility as a parent to decide what foods are offered and when and where meals and snacks are offered. Try to keep a variety of nutritious and appealing food choices available. Healthy and kid-friendly snack ideas include:
  - String cheese.
  - Whole-wheat crackers and peanut butter.
  - Air-popped or low-fat microwave popcorn.
  - Frozen juice bars made with 100% real fruit.
  - Fruit and dried fruit.
  - Baby carrots with hummus or bean dip.
  - Low-fat yogurt.
- The need for personal choice. Power struggles between a parent and child can affect eating behavior. If children are pressured to eat a certain food, they are likely to refuse to eat that food, even if it is something they usually would enjoy. Remember, your responsibility is to provide a variety of nutritious foods. Your child's job is to decide what and how much he or she will eat from the choices you offer.
- Emotion. A child's sadness, anxiety, or family crisis can cause undereating or overeating. If you think your child's emotions are affecting his or her eating, focus on resolving the problem that is causing the emotions instead of focusing on the eating behavior. If your child is healthy and eating a nutritious and varied diet, yet eats very little, he or she may simply need less food energy (calories) than other children. Similarly, some children need more daily calories than others the same age or size, and they eat more than you might expect. Every child has different calorie needs. In rare cases, a child may eat more or less than usual because of a medical condition that affects his or her appetite. If your child has a medical condition that affects how he or she eats, talk with your child's doctor about how you can help your child get the right amount of nutrition.

What are the risks of eating poorly? Poor eating habits can cause your child to not receive the necessary amount of nutrients (such as vitamins, minerals, and protein) that he or she needs to grow and develop normally. This can lead to being underweight or overweight. Poor eating habits include routinely not getting enough to eat, having very limited food choices, or repeatedly eating more than the body needs. Poorly nourished children tend to have weaker immune systems, increasing their chances of illness. Food restriction causes children to ignore their internal hunger gauges. Children who have their food restricted often end up heavier, because they become anxious about food and eating. Anxiety about not getting enough to eat will often lead a child to overeat whenever he or she gets a chance. This causes the child to become less in touch with how hungry or full he or she is, and the child becomes more likely to eat more than his or her body needs. This can also happen when children or teens follow weight-loss diets.

## About the Author