

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Encouraging Healthy Eating Choices

WE'VE ALL HAD THE EXPERIENCE of cooking something sumptuous only to have a child say "Yuck!" or push the food aside and ask for foods with no nutritional value. People often report having difficulty getting their children to eat healthy foods. They experience the common paradox that the more they urge children to eat, the more resistant their children become.

It is not uncommon for children with strong reactions to foods to have extreme preferences, sometimes eating only starches or refusing vegetables. As children get older and have more opportunities to eat outside the home, parents find it harder to influence their food choices.

Research shows that there are crucial ways that parents can influence children to make healthy eating choices. Here are some ideas:

Ask for ideas. Ask a dietician for help in instilling healthy eating habits. Teachers are happy to offer suggestions for nutritional lunches.

Make meal times relaxed. Did you like to be pressured to eat as a child? A dietetic specialist told me that pressuring is now considered "force feeding." Children should be able to eat in a very relaxed atmosphere, where they are given time and encouragement to try new foods. We want them to develop the ability to notice when they are hungry and to stop eating when they are full. Offer children positive feedback for trying new foods, for eating their vegetables, for knowing when they've had enough.

Allow ample time for eating. The attitudes and habits we develop about eating can last a lifetime. Our rushed schedules often keep us from taking time to talk about foods and enjoy them.

Pay attention to what you eat. Studies show that children pay attention to their parents' eating practices. Remember that you are your child's eating role model. It's helpful for you to talk about the nutritious foods you like, without pressuring your child to eat them. ("I love mangoes. They taste so good and they are so healthy.")

Have family dinners. Research shows again and again that eating dinner as a family has positive effects on children's nutritional habits, especially among older children and adolescents. Healthier food is typically provided at family meals than young people would choose if they were making their own selections, but there is also more discussion of nutrition and appropriate portions at family dinner times.

Avoid using foods as a reward or punishment. It's so tempting to soothe a crying child by offering a treat or to take dessert away for a negative behavior that doesn't relate to food. So many of the practices we have related to children's eating habits come from a time when there was little psychological awareness. Understanding the problems that lead to obesity or eating disorders can help us nurture healthy attitudes toward food.

Let's remember what encouraged us to make healthy eating choices as children, and concentrate on enjoying the wonderful food available to us with our families, classmates, and friends.

April 16, 2014