

SKIP THE FOOD FIGHTS: 10 WAYS TO GET KIDS TO EAT HEALTHIER

Research suggests that if we want our kids to eat healthfully, we have to rethink our strategies. Here are 10 tips based on the latest research and expert opinion that will help even the pickiest of eaters to eat healthier.

1. Model healthy eating.

One of the most important actions you can take to help your children eat healthier is for you to eat healthier. In one study, parental modeling was associated with increased milk, fruit juice and vegetable intake.

2. Eat together.

Not only are family meals generally more nutritious for children, eating together also offers an opportunity to socialize about food and eating, and model healthy behaviors. Even if it is only twice per week, planning family meals into a weekly routine goes a long way toward helping children to develop healthier eating habits.

3. Increase exposure to healthy foods.

One of the best ways you can help your children develop healthy eating habits is to repeatedly expose them to a wide variety of foods. Just because a child shuns a food once, do not label it “rejected.” Instead, continue to reintroduce it and expect that it may take up to 15 times before the child will accept it.

4. Let them choose the portion size.

Several studies suggest that you can empower your kids to let their internal cues of hunger and fullness guide how much they eat by allowing them to choose their own portion sizes.

5. Share the control.

Requiring your children to consume a particular food to receive a “reward” such as a dessert is more likely to increase their dislike of the food they are required to eat, while increasing their desire for the typically unhealthy “reward” food. Higher levels of parental control and pressure to eat also are associated with lower fruit and vegetable intake and higher intake of dietary fat.

6. Refuse to be a “short order” cook.

Picky eaters can wreak havoc on an enjoyable family meal, compelling some parents to make special accommodations for each child just so everyone will have something that they will eat. You can promote healthier



eating by refusing to accommodate special requests, while at the same time making sure to serve at least one healthy food that the child likes at each mealtime.

7. Limit television time.

While television viewing has been associated with a variety of negative behaviors including poor school performance and childhood obesity, it is also linked to overall worse nutrition. This may largely be due to the enormous amount of advertising for unhealthy foods such as sugary breakfast cereals, soft drinks, candy, salty snack products, and highly processed and fast foods. Research has shown that exposure to advertisements for food products increases children’s choice of, and preference for, these advertised foods.

8. Exploit similarities.

Experts suggest that you should exploit similarities to develop a taste preference for new foods. Once a food is accepted, find similarly colored or flavored “food bridges” to expand the variety of foods a child will eat. For example, if a child likes pumpkin pie, try mashed sweet potatoes, and then mashed carrots.

9. Make eating healthy fun.

You can make learning about healthy nutrition and physical activity fun and educational for your children. For example, grow healthy foods in the garden or take your kids to a farmer’s market and let them pick out a new vegetable or fruit to try at home.

Try to take a break from the mealtime battles, and take advantage of your child’s wonderment of the world to teach a lesson about health and fitness.

10. Skip the food fights.

Research suggests that the more parents pressure their children to eat certain foods, the less likely they will be to develop a taste for them and continue to eat them often as an adult. If you want to get your kids to eat vegetables and other healthy foods because your kids like them, then you will have to employ different strategies — increasing accessibility and exposure, minimizing the competition, modeling, vowing to not say anything when a child refuses a food, and helping make food taste good, for starters. In short, the most successful parents of healthy eaters opt to skip the food fights.

Additional Resources

ACE Fit Facts: *Parents...Eat Your Words!*
www.acefitness.org/fitfacts/fitfacts_display.aspx?itemid=2681

American Dietetic Association. “Raising Healthy Eaters from Preschool to High School.” www.eatright.org/Public/content.aspx?id=6742

KidsHealth: Healthy Eating
kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/habits.html

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at www.acefitness.org/GetFit and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts:™



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