Parents and children are partners for healthy eating. Parents are responsible for what foods are offered to their children, as well as when and where these foods are eaten, both at home and away from home. Children choose which of the offered foods to eat and how much.

The goals of this healthy eating partnership are:
- to make mealtimes more pleasant.
- to prevent fights about food.
- to take some of the hassle out of mealtimes.

Responsibilities of Parents

Select & Buy Food: Parents are responsible for providing a variety of healthy, nutritious foods for the entire family. Children and adults need the same nutrients but in different amounts. They both need the same number of servings from each food group, although children's serving sizes are smaller.

Parents are their children's primary role models for healthful eating, as well as physical activity habits. If a parent says that he doesn't like broccoli, then the children may decide they don't like it either. Caregivers also should set a good example by eating a balance and variety of nutritious foods.

All foods can be part of a healthy diet if eaten in moderation. There are no "good" or "bad" foods, although empty calorie snacks such as cookies, candy, chips and soft drinks should be eaten only occasionally. Children who grow up in a home filled with these high-fat, high-sugar foods learn to like them better than healthful foods like vegetables, fruits, whole grains and low-fat milk.

Parents decide what foods come into the kitchen. To prevent arguments, don't buy unhealthy high-fat, high-sugar foods. However, banishing these treats completely from children's diets might cause them to want these treats even more. Limit the amount of these foods by offering them in sensible portions as occasional treats. To keep portions the right size for children:
- Divide fries, onion rings and desserts among the entire family at a restaurant.
- Serve soft drinks in small glasses.
- Buy snack-size candy bars.
- Buy single-serving sizes of cookies and chips, or make your own single-serving sizes in resealable snack bags.
- Choose small portions for yourself, and let your children see you enjoying it.

Make Meals & Snacks: Parents are responsible for meal preparation. Expecting young children to find their own food in the kitchen is not acceptable. If parents are away from children at mealtimes, all meals and snacks should be arranged beforehand.

Offer children a variety of healthful foods at an early age. According to research, children have to see a food several times before they will try it, and several more times before they learn to like it.

Let children help plan menus, prepare meals and clean up the kitchen. When they are involved, they will be more likely to eat the food. Small children can set the table, tear salad greens, measure and mix ingredients, and do other simple tasks.

Provide Regular Meals & Snacks: Set a routine time and place for eating. Young children need three meals a day and healthful snacks between meals. They should eat about every two to three hours, because their small stomachs are about the size of a fist and can't hold enough food to last five or six hours like adults' stomachs can. Allow
children some quiet time before meals and snacks, since they eat better when relaxed.

Families should eat together as much as possible. This allows members to talk to each other. Children also can learn good eating habits and table manners by watching their parents and older siblings.

When children are thirsty between meals, offer them water. If they fill up on juice and milk between meals, they might not be hungry and ready to eat the next meal. "Pacifier snacks," which are those eaten less than an hour before the next meal, may interfere with children's eating routines, also.

There is a time and place for snacks, so take them seriously. Teach children to stop the habit of "mindless eating," such as snacking while watching TV and taking a second helping of food just because it's there.

Affection and attention are the best rewards that parents can give children. Using food to reward, comfort or punish children promotes unhealthy attitudes about food. The following statements are examples of these negative methods.

- "If you pick up all your toys, I'll give you a cookie." (reward method)
- "I know it hurt when you fell down. I'll give you a piece of cake to make you feel better." (comfort method)
- "You have to eat all your peas before you can watch TV." (punishment method)

Children tend to develop preferences for foods that are used to reward or comfort them. In contrast, they may dislike foods that they have to eat before being allowed to do something fun like watching TV or playing outdoors.

Make Meal & Snack Times Pleasant: Parents and children share responsibility for making meals and snack times pleasant, but parents are the leaders. Here are a few tips for parents:

- Do not pressure children to eat. Cancel your family membership in the clean plate club.
- Never rush children to eat, because they generally take longer to eat than adults.
- Allow children to leave the table when they have had enough to eat.
- Avoid distractions by turning off the TV, radio, video games and computer.
- Learn how to talk to each other, as well as how to listen.
- Don't talk about problems or discipline.
- Teach children correct table manners.
- Begin some family traditions. Positive food memories created during childhood last a lifetime.

Responsibilities of Children

Choose Whether to Eat or Not: Children decide whether or not they are hungry. They should know how it feels to eat until they are satisfied but not overly full. This teaches them to eat enough without overeating.

If children do not like the food being offered or do not want to eat, allow them to leave the table. Simply remind them that the next meal or snack is several hours away, and don't give them more food until then. Begging or threatening puts too much emphasis on whether children eat. Uneaten food can be reheated for another meal or frozen and taken to work for lunch.

Decide How Much Food to Eat: Sometimes children may not be hungry. Other times they may want to eat more, especially during growth spurts.

Never make children eat everything on their plates. Serve them small, appropriate amounts or let them serve their own plates. If they want more food, allow them to ask for seconds, but wait five minutes to see if they are still hungry. A second helping should be about half the size of the first serving.

The Golden Rule for Feeding Young Children

Parents are responsible for providing nutritious meals and snacks for their children each day. Children are responsible for what foods they eat and how much.

For More Information

For reliable, research-based information on healthful eating according to USDA's MyPyramid for Kids, refer to: HGIC 4011, MyPyramid for Kids; HGIC 4104, Picky Eaters and HGIC 4105, Making Mealtimes Pleasant.
Sources:

5. This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by Janis G. Hunter, HGIC Nutrition Specialist, and Katherine L. Cason, Professor, State Program Leader for Food Safety and Nutrition, Clemson University. (New 02/08.)

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