Healthy Eating Habits for Children

Children need to develop good eating habits early in life. Overweight is the most common nutrition problem among American children today, nearly tripling over the past 30 years. Twenty-five to fifty percent of today’s children will become over-weight or obese adults. If children learn to make proper food choices, these statistics can be decreased.

What are Habits?
Habits are actions that are done automatically and are learned by repeating frequently. Remember learning to drive a car? Each step had to be thought through carefully: put the key in the ignition, put the car into drive, and apply the brakes at stop lights. After driving for several years, these movements became automatic. They are done out of habit.

Changing Habits
Healthy eating does not become habit overnight. It takes time and effort to make it a part of a daily routine. Good or bad habits can be formed in anything, including eating. No thought is given to where, when, and what is eaten. Eating while doing certain activities can become a habit. For example, it becomes automatic to grab a candy bar to eat while watching TV or reading a book.

Children form habits that will last a lifetime. Encourage them to form good eating habits, because poor eating habits can lead to obesity and may result in impaired health. The following bad eating habits contribute to weight problems and can lead to chronic health problems:

- Snacking while watching TV
- Using food as a reward to entice good behavior. "Behave now and I’ll give you candy later." This is like saying "Here is something unhealthy for you as a reward for being good." This reinforces an emotional link to eating.
- Using food as a form of recreation to make oneself feel good. "I’m bored! Let’s go out for pizza."
- Treating children with food. "Bring home a good report card and we’ll go for ice cream."
- Having snack foods like candy, chips, and soft drinks in plain sight

Eating foods of little nutritional value such as candy, cookies, chips, and doughnuts contributes empty calories to the diet. This usually prevents children from being open to eating the wide variety of foods needed for growth and good health. Research has shown that foods used as "rewards" become more desirable to children than if they had not been used as rewards.

Promoting Good Eating Habits in Children

- Follow these suggestions to help children establish good life-long eating habits to prevent weight problems:
- Eat a variety of nutritious foods. Be willing to try new foods.
- Establish a regular family meal pattern. Three nutritious meals supplemented by healthy snacks are recommended.
- Avoid eating a large amount at one time and minimize eating after the evening meal. Many overweight people skip breakfast, miss lunch or eat very lightly, snack in the afternoon, and eat 75% or more of daily food after 4 p.m.
- Learn serving sizes for each family member. Serve just enough food to meet their needs, especially if a family member has difficulty controlling his or her weight. Today’s
restaurant portions are often larger than a recommended serving size.

- Make mealtime and snacktime pleasant. Avoid fussing, nagging, arguing, or complaining at the table. Mealtime stress can lead to emotional overeating.
- Help children find ways other than eating to address emotions. Although eating may feel good for a while, food can not solve problems.
- Eat in only one place in the home. This eliminates snacking in front of the TV and in the bedroom. Eating while watching TV shifts attention away from the food, making it is easy to overeat.
- Do not let eating become a form of recreation. Find a hobby to substitute for "recreational eating." Then, when working on the hobby, avoid eating for "extra fun."
- Plan nutritious snacks ahead of time. Waiting until hunger strikes to decide what snack to eat usually results in choosing a food low in nutritional value and high in calories.
- Provide snacks that are high in nutrients in relation to calories. Stock the kitchen with low-calorie, easy-to-grab nutritious snacks. Fruits, raw vegetables, milk, juice and vanilla wafers are good choices. Keep prepared fruits and vegetables in the refrigerator. Fruits, carrots, celery, cauliflower, etc. can be rinsed in plain water and cut so that they are ready to eat. Very few people will stop and clean celery when they are hungry.
- Keep snack foods where kids can see them. Leave fresh fruit on the kitchen counter, and store other foods in see-through containers and clear plastic bags so the contents are visible. When children come home from school hungry, they will eat almost anything in sight.
- Keep treats just what they are – treats! They should not become a daily habit. Eating doughnuts, sweet desserts and other high-calorie foods can easily become a habit if they are always in the home. Think of them as "sometimes" foods.
- Avoid buying problem foods in which the family may overindulge. Just seeing food stimulates the appetite for many people.

Keep foods like cookies in cabinets where they are less convenient and tempting.

- Limit the amount of snacks. Children should not be allowed to eat all the snacks they want. Snacks are to curb the appetite, not substitute for a meal.
- Teach children to eat when they are hungry, not out of boredom or just because they have seen a snack food advertised on TV. Sometimes grabbing a cookie or a handful of chips may be more habit than hunger. They should ask themselves, "Am I really hungry, and do I need to eat?" They must learn to read their own body signals for hunger and satisfaction. However, many children’s hunger is real when they come home from school. They may need to eat a snack to curb their appetite before dinner.

Healthy Snack Ideas

Snacks are small meals that must be planned for ahead of time. Snack foods should be part of children’s regular dietary pattern and provide nutrients that they need. Try these healthful, no-cook snacks.

Fruit Slices: Spread peanut butter on apple or Banana Slices.

Veggies with Dip: Cut carrots, celery, cucumbers, or zucchini into sticks or coins. Then dip them into prepared salsa.

Snack Kebobs: Cut raw vegetables and fruit into chunks. Skewer them onto thin pretzel sticks. (To prevent discoloration, dip cut pieces of fruit in orange juice.)

Salsa Quesadillas: Fill a soft tortilla with cheese and salsa, fold over, and grill.

Banana Pops: Peel a banana and dip it in yogurt. Roll in crushed breakfast cereal and freeze.

Pudding Shakes: Mix ½ cup low-fat or fat free milk with 3 tablespoons of instant pudding mix. Put in a non-breakable, covered container. Make sure the lid is tight. Shake and pour into a cup.

Peanut Butter Balls: Mix peanut butter and bran or cornflakes in a bowl. Shape the mixture into balls with clean hands. Roll balls in crushed graham crackers.

Ice Cream-Wiches: Put a small scoop of ice cream or frozen yogurt between two oatmeal cookies or frozen waffles. Make a batch of these sandwiches ahead and freeze them.
Here are some recipes for tasty snacks that are simple to make:

**Lunch Box Pizzas:**
1 tube refrigerated buttermilk biscuits (10 biscuits)
¼ cup tomato sauce
1 teaspoon Italian seasoning or oregano
10 slices pepperoni
¾ cup shredded Monterey Jack cheese (or other favorite cheese)
¾ cup sliced or chopped vegetables (green peppers, mushrooms, broccoli)

Flatten each biscuit into a 3-inch circle and press into a greased muffin cup. Combine the tomato sauce and Italian seasoning; spoon 1 teaspoonful into each cup. Top each with a slice of pepperoni, a vegetable topping of your choice and 1 tablespoon of cheese. Bake at 425 °F for 10-15 minutes, or until golden brown. Cool and package individually in plastic sandwich bags.

These are good cold in a lunch box or made for a snack. Include an ice pack or a box of frozen juice with the wrapped pizzas to keep them cold.

Makes 10 servings. One serving provides 256 calories, 8 grams protein, 0 grams fiber, and 14 grams fat.
*(The ABC’s of Growing Healthy Kids: Keep on Snacking)*

**Ice Cream in a Bag:**
Pint-sized zipper-type bag
1 tablespoon sugar
½ teaspoon vanilla
½ cup low-fat or fat free milk
Gallon-sized zipper-type bag
3 cups ice
½ cup salt

Put the sugar, vanilla, and milk in the pint-sized zipper bag. Close the bag, making sure it is sealed. Combine ice and salt in the gallon-sized bag. Put the pint bag inside the gallon bag and close the large bag securely. Turn and roll the bag for approximately 6 minutes until it becomes a semi-soft, delicious treat.

Makes one serving. One serving provides 116 calories, 4 grams protein, 0 grams fiber, and 0 grams fat.
*(The ABC’s of Growing Healthy Kids: Keep on Snacking)*

**Happy Trail Mix:**
2 cups honey graham cereal
1 cup tiny marshmallows
1 cup peanuts
½ cup semisweet chocolate or butterscotch pieces
½ cup raisins

Combine all ingredients. Store in a closed plastic bag or covered container.

Makes about 5 cups or 10 servings. One serving provides 260 calories, 7 grams protein, 3 grams fiber, and 15 grams fat.
*(The ABC’s of Growing Healthy Kids: Keep on Snacking)*

Sources:

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by J. G. Hunter, HGIC Information Specialist, and K. L. Cason, Professor, State EFNEP Coordinator, Clemson University. (New 09/05.)