

Healthy Habits for a Healthy Weight in Children: A Parent's Guide

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Maintaining a healthy weight throughout childhood is not as easy today as it was in previous decades. If you think back to your own childhood, it's probably not hard to figure out why. Years ago, kids didn't have access to as much TV, video games, and electronic devices as they do today. Kids were more likely to have scheduled physical education (PE) at school, and there was less worry for parents about kids playing outside safely. There also were not nearly as many fast food restaurants, convenience foods, or super-sized portions and options. The ability for children to maintain a healthy weight in today's world is challenging due to the ease of increased food consumption and the barriers to sufficient physical activity to burn the food up.

There are many factors that influence the weight of a person. Some of these we can change and some we cannot. For example, a person has no control over their genetics, which play a role in a person's ability to achieve a healthy weight. What we want to focus on are the areas that we can control. One of the areas that we can influence is our lifestyle—making healthy food choices, eating smaller portions, and being physically active. Some lifestyle factors are easier to change than others. For example, it may not be possible for a child to walk to school because of safety issues. But the child's family could choose to take a walk after dinner twice a week.

This article describes several options parents can use to help achieve or maintain a healthy weight in children through establishing healthy habits that can last a lifetime. The healthy habits discussed in this article will be beneficial not only to children but also to the entire family.

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THE ROLES OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN WHEN IT COMES TO HEALTHY EATING

It is important to distinguish the responsibilities that parents and children should have when it comes to creating and maintaining healthy eating habits that can lead to achieving a healthy weight.

Parents play an important role as a provider and role model for kids. This is true not just for food but also for many other factors in the home. Food and meal habits are shared within the home beginning at birth. What is done at home with food is the most important influencer of food habits for children, even more so than school, friends, and social media. The earlier that healthy eating habits are established and the more they are role modeled for children, the better. But no matter what has been done in the past, it is never too late to change or role model healthy eating habits at home.

Children should be exposed to a variety of healthy foods at an early age. Even if children don't like a particular type of food at one point, with enough exposure they may grow to like it later. Don't give up. Keep serving the food and try different ways to cook or prepare it. Have children participate in meal preparation or helping with the fruit and vegetable garden at home.

It is important not to force your children to eat a certain amount of food or force them to clean their plates. You want children to learn how much food is the right amount for them to feel satisfied. Children should be responsible for deciding how much food is appropriate to provide the energy they need until the next scheduled meal or snack. Of course, this means that if they choose not to eat or eat very little, they must wait until the next meal or snack time to eat again. It would not be appropriate for them to eat a snack 10 minutes after a meal.

It is critical not to reward children for eating or punish them for not eating. It is also important not to use food as a reward for good grades or accomplishments. It is not ideal to use food as a way to feel better when something bad happens. Food should be encouraged as a way to meet the nutrient needs of the body and to be enjoyable and satisfying to eat. It is key to also role model this by ensuring that food is not used in the home as an emotional coping strategy.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR HEALTHY EATING FOR A HEALTHY WEIGHT

- Cook at home and eat out less often. Eat together as a family.
- Prepare balanced meals of grains, fruits/vegetables, protein, and 1% or nonfat dairy.
- Serve foods in smaller portions, using smaller-sized plates.
- Be sure that kids eat a balanced breakfast each morning.
- Have an eating schedule that clearly defines meal and snack times.

- Encourage eating just enough food to feel satisfied instead of full, even if that means that food is left on the plate.
- Ensure that snack foods are healthy and are served in small portions; snacks should be at a scheduled time in between meals that are far apart as well as before or after intense exercise or sports.
- Avoid or limit drinking calories (soda, juice, sweet tea, lemonade) with the exception of 1% or nonfat milk.

Guidelines for increasing food groups that are important for achieving or maintaining a healthy weight in kids:

Fruits and vegetables

- Keep fruit in a bowl on the countertop.
- Make smoothies with frozen fruit, milk, and yogurt.
- Serve fruit for breakfast and snacks, and instead of dessert.
- Have kids munch on fresh cut-up vegetables when they are hungry before dinner.
- Serve vegetables at meals. Have kids pick the vegetables to have at dinner.
- Be a role model—eat a variety of fruits and vegetables.

Milk

- Serve milk (1% or nonfat) at meals.
- Keep yogurt and string cheese on hand for snacks.
- Make chocolate milk with 1% or nonfat milk and just a little chocolate syrup.
- Make oatmeal with milk instead of water.
- Make smoothies with milk or yogurt and get creative with other ingredients.
- Add low-fat mozzarella cheese to tacos, pizzas, or burritos.
- Be a role model—eat a variety of dairy products.

Ideas for Decreasing Sugary Drinks

Children drink an average of two soft drinks a day. This is equal to 15 teaspoons of sugar. Think about what your child drinks during the day. How much milk? Water? Sugary drinks? Where do they get sugary drinks? At home? School? Do they buy them at fast food places or convenience stores? Now think of ways they might be able to drink less of a sugary drink and more water or milk.

- Drink milk or water instead of soda at meals.
- Have your child carry a water bottle.
- Remind children that when thirsty, water is the very best thirst quencher.
- Put money saved from not buying soda in a jar and spend on a family outing.
- Keep cold water in the refrigerator.
- Flavor water at home with lemon or orange slices, cucumber chunks, or other natural fruits or vegetables.
- Put a cooler with ice water and cups outside where kids are playing.
- Be a role model—make water your main beverage.



What about fruit juice? In some fruit drinks, juice is a very small part of the drink and the fruit drink is similar to a soft drink. One hundred percent fruit juice can contribute important nutrients like vitamin C to a child's diet. However, even juice that is 100% fruit juice has a lot of calories (about 120 calories per cup). The best choice is to eat whole fruit, which has fiber, other nutrients, and fewer calories, and instead drink water.

Ideas for Increasing Active Time and Decreasing "Screen Time" for Children

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016) recommends that children ages 2–5 years limit screen use to one hour per day of high-quality programming. They also suggest that children 6 years and older have consistent limits put on them for media use, making sure that media does not take the place of adequate sleep and physical activity. Think about how much time your child or children spend watching TV, playing video games, and using devices like phones and tablets. Also, consider how much physical activity they are getting each day in comparison to screen time and if they are getting sufficient sleep (8–10 hours per night depending on their age). The 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends one hour per day of physical activity for youth.

Ideas for decreasing screen time and increasing active time might include:

- Set a limit on TV/video/computer/device time per day.
- Increase the use of video games and apps that are physical activity based.
- Go on family walks or bike rides.
- Do "silly dancing" to favorite music.
- Plan outside time with simple toys like balls, hula hoops, or jump ropes.
- Give sports equipment or active toys for holiday or birthday gifts.
- Walk to school.
- Go on outings to the park or playground.
- Join a team sport the child is interested in.

- Be a role model—get active yourself, and actively play with your kids.

Ideas for Encouraging Appropriate Portions of Food

Parents of overweight children are often concerned that the child is eating way too much. This can lead to a power struggle between the parent and child. If parents are controlling and restricting how much a child eats, this will actually backfire, and the child will want to eat even more and can develop behaviors such as sneaking food.

Foods like chips or cookies shouldn't be eaten frequently, but it's fine to have "treats" occasionally. Banning these types of foods completely can lead children to eating too much of them when they do get a chance to eat them. Children need to learn to "listen to their stomachs" to know when they are hungry and when they get satisfied or full. Most children can learn to recognize when they are hungry and full and will not overeat. However, some children don't seem to be able to control how much they eat. A child may also have a particular "problem food" that he/she tends to overeat. If a child really seems to be overeating on a regular basis, a parent can give guidance to the child to help them recognize when they've had enough food. This should always be done in a positive and loving manner, not in any way that berates or embarrasses the child. Some strategies that might help a child eat less of a problem food or manage the amount of food eaten include:

- Ask the child if their tummy still feels hungry.
- Don't have large amounts of food on the table.
- Remove problem foods from the table after everyone has had one serving.
- Put food away right after the meal is over.
- Have everyone in the family eat at the same time, so food is not out later to tempt the child.
- Encourage him/her to eat slowly and enjoy his/her meal.
- Don't order large individual meals at restaurants; instead share meals among several family members.
- Be a role model—eat reasonable portion sizes.

Ideas for Making Time for Family Meals

Children who eat meals together with their families have more nutritious diets. In our hectic world, it can be difficult to get everyone to the table at the same time for a meal. But with a little planning ahead and getting the whole family involved, it is possible. Think about how often you eat together as a family now. Then think about the reasons it isn't happening as often as you would like. See if you can think of possible solutions. Some ideas might include:

- Have a parent get home from work earlier, so the family can eat together.

- Use a slow cooker to prepare a main dish that cooks when you're away so dinner can be on the table quickly before family members are off to evening activities.
- Make sure everyone keeps their schedules free for several evenings a week.
- Have children help prepare the meal.
- Turn off the TV and put electronics away during meals.
- Have a set time for dinner so everyone can plan to be home at that time.

Ideas for Improving Your Child's Self Esteem

Because of the stigma that being overweight has in our society, overweight children often have lower self esteem and more depression compared with other children. This is very sad and unfortunate. Parents can have a big role in helping their child feel good about themselves. A child who feels good about himself or herself is more likely to make changes like trying a new sport.

Some ways a parent can help a child have good self-esteem are:

- Let your child know that you love him or her just the way they are—say it often.
- Praise your child for things they do well (and do it in front of others).
- Praise your child when they make good food choices or do things to increase their physical activity.
- Let your child know that kids' bodies come in different shapes and sizes and every body is a good body.
- Let other children in the family know it is not acceptable to tease the overweight child because of their size.
- Talk to the teacher if the child is getting teased at school.
- Talk to the child about how to handle teasing.
- Have your child get involved in activities that they enjoy doing and talk about those.
- Have your child get involved in community service projects with you or with children's organizations.
- Be a role model—be positive about your own weight and the weight of others.

Beyond the Home

Think about ways you could get involved with your child's school or your community to improve the physical activity and nutrition environment for children. Most schools have parent organizations that can positively influence things like which fundraising foods

are sold during the school day or after school activities available for kids. Teams are also being formed in many New Mexico school districts that are partnering with health professionals, parents, and community members to improve schools. Your city's Parks and Recreation Department may also be a place where you can get involved to make playgrounds and activity programs more available and affordable for families.

Further Reading

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