

Parenting for Healthy Eating Habits

Dr. Deidre Macdonald, ND

The choices you make around your child's diet can influence your child's long-term health prospects more than any other action you might take as a parent. As parents we are laying the foundation of a lifetime of eating habits. What kind of habits do you want your child to have? We know now the crucial role that nutrition plays in determining our health. In my family practice, I have seen too many children suffering from poor nutrition. Few children in this part of the world lack sufficient calories, however many children lack sufficient nutrition, and are therefore considered malnourished. Children who are well nourished perform better academically, function better behaviourally and emotionally, and have less anxiety, depression and hyperactivity.

Obesity is another result of poor eating habits. As parents we should be concerned not only about the long term health consequences of obesity (such as increased risk of heart disease and cancer) but also the effect on a child's budding sense of self. Obese children report lower self esteem, more loneliness, sadness and nervousness and were more likely to report smoking and consuming alcohol.

Food in the modern world:

A lot has changed in the world of nutrition in the last 100 years. In the past, food was often fresh, locally grown and certainly free of preservatives and additives. Foods such as grains, nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetables fish and meats are the foods that our bodies have evolved on for 1000's of years.

In the last 100 years, with the advent of the multi billion dollar food-processing industry, things have changed. But our body's needs have not. We are bombarded with quick-fix and highly addictive foods laden with sugar, salt and fat. The foods marketed to children are hardly what their bodies need. Kids are big business – the food giants know that kids have a lot of market clout. That's why they market aggressively to children aiming to program them with brand loyalty at an early age. Such advertising aims to promote products by convincing those who will always believe.

The next time you feel tempted to serve your kids Kraft Dinner, remember Philip Morris, the world's largest cigarette manufacturer, owns Kraft Foods. We need to become media savvy and teach our children to think critically about what advertising is really about: profits at the expense of our health. Let your children know that "My saying 'no' means I love you too much to let you have something that can hurt you".

Healthy Eating Habits

- Parents are leaders, teachers and role models:

Modeling good eating habits to your children. Provide healthy choices over and over and over. Show them that you are not going to change your values because they are having a tantrum.

- Invest time in food preparation:

Providing your child good food takes time and effort. If you value the health and wellbeing of your family, you need to invest in it.

- Plan ahead and get kids involved

Menu planning can be a family affair. Delegate some food preparation to the kids. Kids will often eat the foods they choose and make themselves. Plan ahead for snacks on busy days especially on the road.

- Celebrate healthy, natural foods

When you model to children that you enjoy beautiful, simple, natural foods, they will follow your lead eventually.

Unhealthy Eating Habits:

One of the most important legacies we can leave our children with is a healthy relationship with food. In counselling people with health issues, I often see that the roots of their illness lie in their addictive relationship with food. For example, a diabetic who turns to sugar for comfort. A heart attack survivor who finds solace in high fat foods and chocolate bars. I see it every day. In my experience, 90% of weight issues lie in the use of food for emotional reasons instead of nutrition. The seeds of using food for comfort almost always start in childhood.

Avoid the following pitfalls:

Using food as a bribe or reward

- Don't make deals with food:
 - If you eat all your vegetables, you can have dessert.
 - If you stop screaming, I'll buy you the candy you want.
 - If you are good girl you can have a trip to McDonalds.
- Do use natural consequences:
 - If you scream in the store we will go home now.
- Don't celebrate successes with food:
 - What a great report card! You deserve a trip to Dairy Queen!
- Do seek to encourage intrinsic reward:
 - You must feel really proud of yourself for getting good grades. Have a big hug!

Using food as emotional comfort

- Don't soothe with food:
 - Did that shot hurt? We'll have to get you a treat.
 - Did you have a bad day? I'll make your favorite dessert and you'll feel better.
- Do teach stress management skills:
 - Relaxation techniques (deep breathing), assertiveness, problem solving and self-esteem.

Consistently expose you child to healthy foods and minimize access to the addictive, processed foods. As a parent, you do your child a great service by mentoring to them a healthy relationship with food. In the next issue, I will discuss some ideas on preparing healthy foods that kids will enjoy.

Dr. Deidre Macdonald is a naturopathic physician with a family practice in Courtenay. Her office can be reached at 897-0235.