

## Navigating Food with Your Child

May 2018



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Eating, it shouldn't be that hard. All living things need fuel to continue to thrive and all animals consume food as their means of energy intake. However, if you ask a parent about their child's eating habits you are bound to hear about a number of challenges they face as they navigate what has become a complicated maze of food rules and concerns about related issues of body esteem.

What was once a simple equation of needing to eat to satiate instinctual hunger, has become a complex web of information overload as we are faced with anxiety inducing rates of obesity, type 2 diabetes, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Parents want their children to be healthy, happy, and confident and often worry about how to instill "healthy eating habits" without creating body insecurity. This can feel like an insurmountable challenge in a culture that is screaming "get your beach body ready" while serving sugar loaded cereals as a school lunch option.

When thinking about establishing eating patterns that will set your child up for good physical health and emotional well-being, it can often be helpful to take the long-view. The end-goal is a comfortable relationship with food and knowledge that one's value is not determined by their size or shape. It is important to remember that weight is not the best marker for health and that healthy bodies come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and weights.

Here are a few techniques that can help instill eating habits that include eating a wide variety of food, eating to respond to internal cues of hunger and satiety, and instill self-confidence (Manley, MEDA, 2018).

- Family meals: offer a variety of foods, provide time for mindful eating, and model enjoyment of many foods
- Promote positive self-esteem by complimenting children for internal qualities such as kindness, creativity, perseverance, or humor rather than focusing on external appearance
- Create opportunities for joyful movement (family hike, shoot hoops in the driveway, bike to school, dance party) and refrain from counting calories burned by exercise
- Include kids in meal planning and preparation and make it fun. Include all types of food from vegetarian appetizers to a cake-wars bake off for dessert modelling variety and balance.
- Teach children to question what they see and hear in the media. Images are edited and curated. There is healthy body diversity present in our world that is not present in our media.
- Refrain from dieting or cleansing. Diets are associated with long-term weight gain, mood disorders and fatigue. Cleanses deprive the body of needed nutrients.
- Focus on recognizing internal cues such as hunger and desire for movement or rest as opposed to using external cues of "clean plate", serving size, or time limits for eating or exercise.
- Avoid commenting on your body shape or weight as well as commenting on the bodies of others. Focus on function, noting what your body can do for you, rather than how it appears.

Consult your pediatrician for any concerns about your child's weight gain or weight loss. If your child expresses concern about their weight or appearance, it is important to address this issue as eating disorders and body image disorders carry significant health risks. Seek consultation with a nutritionist or mental health professional for concerns about body image, self-esteem or eating patterns.

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