

Provide Structure to Help Your Child Practice Healthy Eating

By Steve Baldwin, MS, RD

My 5-year-old son Josh was sitting at our kitchen table last week at snack time, working on a bowl of blueberries while drawing spaceships, when I noticed that in a matter of minutes his bowl was empty.

“Josh, where did all the blueberries go?” I asked him, thinking they had spilled and the dog was about to strike gold. “In my tummy Dad,” he said through a mouth full of berries. “Please can I have more please?”

One of the wonderful things about children is that they make food choices based on a relatively simple set of guidelines compared to most adults. They don't think about which vitamins or minerals a particular food provides, or how much or little it costs. They don't (at least they shouldn't) eat nutritious foods out of guilt; they don't rationalize having a yummy snack because of the bad day they've had, or how bad the drive home was. Kids have a much more simple way of deciding what and whether to eat: If the food tastes good, and they're hungry, they eat.

Of course, there are other factors that affect what kids eat – for instance, availability. Kids (and adults) can't eat what's not available. If no vegetables are offered, it makes sense that the kid's probably not going to eat many vegetables – and in turn won't grow to appreciate them.

Modeling is another factor. Parents and caregivers provide daily lessons on how to treat others, the kind of language to use, what it means to be honest, and a gazillion other aspects of life. Kids pay attention, and the old adage “actions speak louder than words” applies to food as well. If Mom and Dad don't eat vegetables, why should they?

Parents can help kids grow into curious, healthful, relaxed eaters by providing the right structure early on. Nationally recognized child nutrition expert Ellyn Satter developed what she calls the “Division of Responsibility” in feeding. It's based around the idea that we need to feed our children well (offer a variety of nutritious foods), trust them to eat what they need, and then let the child grow into the body that nature intended. In Satter's model, the parent and the child each have their own unique roles and responsibilities in regards to food: Parents are responsible for the what, when, and where of feeding; children are responsible for how much they eat, and whether they eat at all.

There is a level of trust required by both the parent and child. The child must trust his or her parents to provide regularly scheduled meals and snacks, and to offer foods that are familiar, in addition to new items. In turn, parents must trust that children can self-regulate their food intake, understanding that regular meals and snacks are provided. For the parent, it's about providing boundaries that allow the child to learn and thrive. For the child, it's about receiving the structure they need in order to practice healthful eating.

Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, and lean meats should be offered on a regular basis. Fruits and vegetables in particular can be offered during meals and snacks early on, so that children have the opportunity to choose foods that will support their development now and their health for a lifetime.

In our case, the afore-mentioned blueberries are a family favorite. “Please can I have more please?”

You sure can.

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