



Healthy Food Choices

It's important for children to adopt a healthy lifestyle starting at a young age. Parents play an essential role in helping shape children's eating habits. Try these simple tips to help your children eat well and learn to enjoy nutritious foods.

Focus on eating nutrient-rich foods and building habits.

Lifelong habits are developed throughout childhood, and every opportunity should be provided to build healthy habits¹ — teaching children to choose nutrient-rich foods is more important than ever. Teach children to spot:

- Brightly colored fruits and 100% fruit juice
- Vibrantly colored vegetables
- Whole, fortified and fiber-rich grain foods
- Low-fat and fat-free milk, cheese and yogurt
- Lean meats, skinless poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts

These nutrient-rich foods and beverages provide high amounts of beneficial nutrients compared to the calories they provide. For example, a nutritious snack of a smoothie made with berries and low-fat yogurt has more fat and calories than a diet soda and baked chips; however, it is far better for kids because it has many beneficial nutrients they need for growth and health. The reason why? It's a snack of nutrient-rich, [MyPlate](#) foods.

Set a good example.

Children are better equipped to make nutritious choices if they see you choosing nutrient-rich foods, such as colorful fruits and vegetables, low-fat or fat-free milk, cheese and yogurt, and whole grains.

Use positive messages.

Let kids know that all foods fit into a healthful diet — there are no "good" or "bad" foods. The key is moderation. Positive messages help to avoid the stress and guilt that can lead to eating disorders and poorer eating patterns as children get older.

Set expectations.

It's easier for children to make healthy food choices when they know the family's "nutrition rules of the road." For example: Everyone in the family starts the day with breakfast. Milk is the beverage served at dinner. Or, after-school snacks must come from the [MyPlate Five Food Groups](#).





Cook together.

Children are more likely to get excited about healthful eating when they contribute to meal planning and preparation. Enlist their help when you make soups, salads and pasta sauces. Allow them to add a personal touch to their creations, have a cooking play date when friends visit or take a cooking class together.

Shop together.

Shop for nutrient-rich foods from the perimeter of the supermarket. Help children choose one or two of their favorite nutrient-rich snacks to pack for snack time or eat after school. Engage them in gathering food at farmers' markets, pick-your-own orchards and family gardens, too. Let them find a "new food of the week" to expand their horizons.

Talk about nutritious choices wherever you go.

Talk to kids about smart food choices and how important they are for learning and doing well in school, playing for fun and sports, and feeling good and staying healthy. Whether it's a fast food restaurant, convenience store or vending machine, encourage them to find nutrient-rich options, such as flavored milk or a smoothie instead of soda, or pretzels instead of chips.

Make good nutrition convenient.

Pack the kitchen with nutrient-rich foods that are ready to eat: colorful fruits and cut-up fresh vegetables; low-fat plain and flavored milk, cheese and yogurt; and whole-grain snacks instead of high-fat, high-sugar snacks. Remind kids that these foods are there for the asking.

Make mealtime family time.

Make family mealtime a priority. It can be any meal, not just dinner. Family meals promote good eating habits and overall good nutrition. Involve kids in the planning and preparing, too. It helps them learn that mealtime is important family time.

Remind kids to fuel at school, too.

Encourage kids to choose nutrient-rich foods in the school cafeteria, or pack a healthful lunch at home if you have the time. Have kids purchase milk at school. For school celebrations, send in nutrient-rich snacks like cut fresh fruit and yogurt dip.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 2010. 7th Edition, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 2010. Accessed at: http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/sites/default/files/dietary_guidelines_for_americans/PolicyDoc.pdf. July 18, 2015.



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