

How to Talk with Children About Food

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We live in a culture where children (and adults) find it increasingly hard to feel good about food and their bodies: one in three parents of preschoolers seeks a doctor's help with feeding, up to one in ten children have a 'feeding disorder,' and eating disorders are more common, and in ever-younger children.

Increasingly, eating disorder, and child health experts stress that the current model of nutrition education encourages disordered thinking around eating. Pushing "healthy" foods can make children like them less; demonizing and forbidding "junk" foods may make children obsess about, hide and hoard these foods when old enough to get them on their own. Here are some tips to help rather than harm.

Avoid

- Judgment. "Candy (or sugar, flour, meat...) is bad for you." "That's junk food." Children as young as four report guilt and shame when eating forbidden foods.
- Even kinder, gentler labels like: "Green-light" or "red-light", "growing" or "fun" foods, "healthy" and "unhealthy." Small children still hear "good" and "bad."
- Praising, or judging children around eating: "Olivia is a good, healthy eater, but Ethan is our picky sugar addict."
- Inciting shame or fear: "If you don't (eat X or avoid Y) you will get sick and fat."
- Pressuring, bribing or rewarding children to try new foods. Offer, don't force.
- Using the words "overweight" or "obesity." Or "Fat is bad" messaging, such as fat people "eat too much," or the "wrong" kinds of foods. Two people eating the same types and amounts of food may end up different sizes.
- Implying, "We don't like fat people." Children pick up on prejudices, and fear displeasing their parents (even thin children) if they are not the "right" size.

What to Do

- Stress taste, and balance. Fruits and veggies taste good, too.
- Be age-appropriate. Small children can learn that banana is a fruit, but don't understand the word "protein."
- Focus on joy and permission. "We are so lucky we get to eat so many wonderful foods; pizza and clementines, green beans, and pie." Maybe, "We shop at the co-op because it's fun to find out where our food comes from."
- Remember that all foods can be part of a balanced intake— including treats.
- Support internal regulation (using the body's wisdom to guide how much to eat). "Is your tummy full, or do you want more?"
- Provide opportunities for fun physical activity. Children need play and movement.
- Focus on health, strength, capability, and the pleasure of movement—not weight.
- Respect body size diversity. Let your children hear you say, "People come in all sizes and that's just fine."

- Neutralize power struggles with a Division of Responsibility in feeding (www.ellynsatterinstitute.org) Parents decided what, when and where the child eats, children decide how much from what is available.
- Create and celebrate food traditions with your children.
- Aim for family meals as often as possible. Family meals are linked with better nutrition, stable weight and less disordered eating.

After all, we teach nutrition best by serving and enjoying the foods we want our children to eat!

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