

Dr. Mahoney's Quick Tips for Healthy Eating Habits in Children

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Here's a list of quick tips to encourage healthy eating habits in children. I have organized my list of ideas by letter to make it easy for busy parents to reference a particular issue. I have tried to highlight important developmental differences along the way.

Children are not simply small adults in terms of what makes up a healthy diet. The two biggest misconceptions that I encounter in my practice are that milk in unlimited amounts is okay (not true!) and that juice is healthy because it contains fruit and vitamins (also not true). Please scan through the entire list at least once, since many of the ideas will be useful at different points in your child's development.

Childhood is the time when we develop our food preferences, attitudes toward food, and comfort-food behaviors. I believe very strongly that parents have a responsibility to help their children learn to eat a diet that will enable their bodies and their brains to get the best start in life.

Trust me, I know this can be challenging! (I have three boys of my own, who, as I write this, are nine, five, and a newborn.) To help you, I have included some ideas of my own as well as many ideas from my two favorite childhood nutrition books: *The Family Nutrition Book* by Dr. Sears (1999) and *Feeding Your Child for Lifelong Health* by Roberts and Heyman (1999). If you want to read more on these subjects, both of these books are available for either loan or purchase at the Kaiser Health Education Office on the fourth floor of the Daly City Medical Office Building.

A = Accessibility, Advocate, and Allergies

- Buy healthy foods and do not have junk food in the house. Children can't eat what is not available. They get enough junk food and treats at school and as snacks at after-school care, sports practices, and games.
- Bring healthy snacks to preschool, events, and sports practices and games. Encourage other parents to do the same. Ask your children's teachers to set rules specifying **no candy or chips** at school.
- Be an advocate for serving healthy lunches at school; until then, pack your children a healthy bag lunch.
- The **most common causes of allergies** are cow's milk, egg whites, nuts, and shellfish. Avoid introducing these too early. No cow's milk or eggs until after age one. No nuts or shellfish until after age two.
- **Tips to prevent allergies** include breast feeding as long as possible and delaying solid foods until after six months. This is especially important if you have a family history of allergies or eczema.

B = Breakfast, Books, and Balance

- Children who eat breakfast learn better. Always try to get your child to eat some protein before school. This will ensure a steady blood sugar level all morning and help prevent problems in learning, concentration, and behavior.
- Read books with good messages about food and nutrition to preschoolers: *Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock*, *Bread and Jam for Frances*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *StellaLuna*, and *Chicken Soup with Rice*. These stories encourage picky eaters to be more adventurous.

- Don't worry if your child's diet is not balanced every day as long as over the course of the week it balances out.

C = Calcium, Cavities, Choking, and Constipation

- Children need plenty of calcium to form strong bones and teeth.
- **High calcium foods** include milk, yogurt, cheese, calcium-fortified orange juice, broccoli, spinach, tofu, and dark green vegetables.
- **Prevent cavities** by offering **no bottles** after 18 months! No middle of the night bottles or falling asleep with a bottle. **Never** put juice in bottles, and be sure to brush teeth daily and maintain an adequate intake of fluoride. If your family is drinking bottled water, buy water with fluoride in it.
- **Top cavity producing foods** are candy (sticky candy such as gummies are the worst), dried fruits, potato chips, cookies, crackers, and, of course, juice and soda. The more frequently teeth are exposed to these foods, the worse the cavities will be.
- **Top foods that cause choking** are grapes, popcorn, peanut butter, raw veggies, nuts, and gum. Avoid these foods in young children.
- **Constipation** can be lessened or prevented by having school age children drink at least 32 ounces of liquid per day and by increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables (especially pears, prunes, and peaches). Beware: Bananas cause constipation! Too much dairy also leads to constipation, so limit milk to 16 ounces of nonfat milk per day.

D = Discovery and Dips

- Take nutrition-focused field trips. Take kids to the grocery store, an orchard or farm, a nursery, or a farmer's market to make new foods more interesting.
- Discuss where foods grow, or grow vegetables yourself to peak an interest in healthy foods.
- Dips of cottage cheese, yogurt, or guacamole can make healthy eating fun.

E = Eggs

- Eggs are good for kids over the age of one. They are full of iron, protein, zinc, and minerals.
- Children under the age of one should **not** have eggs because of the high risk of developing an allergy.

F = Familiarity, Fat, Fiber, Fish, and Fruit

- Create a "bridge of familiarity": when introducing new foods, serve them with a favorite food or change an old favorite slightly to encourage new tastes.
- Remember the Rule of 15: two-year-olds may not accept a new food until it has been offered 15 times, so be patient!
- Kids under three need less fiber than adults. Don't encourage high-fiber foods such as whole grain breads until a child is at least three (unless constipation is a problem).
- Kids under three need more **healthy** fat than adults (the brain is made up of fat and is growing tremendously in childhood). Avoid unhealthy fats such as saturated and trans fat.
- **Constipated children** over the age of three usually need **more fiber**. Serve more fruits, vegetables, multigrain products, wheat germ, and fig newton cookies. Don't forget to offer less dairy and more water also.

- Fish is healthy for children as long as it is low in mercury (for example, salmon, sole, and trout).
- Children under two should avoid shellfish (it can cause severe allergic reactions).
- School age children and adults should have **at least three to five fruits every day** (more is better).

G = Food to Grow and “Foods for Growing”

- Kids like eating food that they have helped grow.
- Discuss which foods make children grow and which foods do not (empty calories such as candy and juice do not make children grow).

H = Helpers

- Let kids help with safe cooking projects, and have them help you choose new, healthy items at the store to try.

I = Introduction of New Foods, and Iron

- Take turns choosing a new food for the family to try.
- Allow **no** negative comments about new foods. Instead, encourage specific and creative comments (for example, “That’s chewy” or “I like crunchy”).
- Iron deficiency leads to decreased IQ and developmental problems (this is easily prevented by restricting milk to 16 to 24 ounces per day and eating iron-containing foods).
- **Foods high in iron** include lean meats (chicken, hamburger), eggs, sardines, cereals, dark green leafy vegetables, egg noodles, beans, peas, dried apricots, and fortified cereals.
- Maximize iron absorption by separating iron-containing foods from dairy products (iron is best absorbed with acidic foods like orange juice).

J = Juice

- **Too much juice is bad.** Serve no more than six to eight ounces of 100 percent juice per day at any age.
- **Juice is full of sugar**, causes obesity, replaces the intake of good calories, and causes cavities.
- **Do not** introduce juice until at least 18 months of age (later is better).
- **Avoid** all “juice drinks” such as Capri Sun and Sunny Delight; these are even worse than pure juice.
- Do not allow a child to sip from a cup of juice throughout the day (even if it’s watered down). The more times teeth are exposed to juice, the more damage to the teeth.

K = Kaleidoscope of Colors

- The darker and brighter the **natural colors**, the healthier the food (picture the thrive ads).

L = Lessons about Foods and Lunch

- Put a penny in soda and watch the corrosion. Lesson: That is what soda does to your teeth. This helps kids understand why they should not drink soda.
- Look up the number of teaspoons of sugar in each kind of soda: one can of Coke has nine teaspoons of sugar. Measure this amount out in a pile to show a child how much sugar that is. Orange soda and Mountain Dew have the most sugar: eleven teaspoons in each can!

- Pack your child a healthy lunch. Avoid school lunches. **Do not include** juice, chips, cookies, or “lunchables.” Do include fruit and water.

M = Milk

- Serve **whole milk** for children ages one to two.
- Serve **2 percent milk** for children ages two to three.
- Serve **1 percent or skim milk** for children three and above.
- Serving 16 to 24 ounces of milk per day provides good calcium and appropriate levels of fat.
- Too much milk is **not** healthy!
- Too much milk causes constipation, iron deficiency, and poor nutrition.
- Too much milk often leads to “picky eaters” because they drink so much milk they are not hungry.
- Children should drink milk out of a cup (**not a bottle**) after 18 months of age to prevent cavities.

N = Foods Kids Should NOT Eat

- Serve **NO high-salt foods** (don’t add salt to meals either).
- Serve **NO soda or “fruit drinks”** (such as Sunny Delight or Capri Sun), as these provide no nutrition, contain tons of calories, and lead to obesity (a can of Coke has calories similar to bag of M&Ms).
- Serve **NO high-nitrite foods** (hotdogs, ham, bologna).
- Serve **NO fish with high levels of heavy metals** or fish from contaminated water (avoid swordfish, shark, and ahi tuna).
- **Limit tuna to chunk light tuna** (it has one-half the mercury of albacore), and serve no more than one can per week to prevent high mercury levels.

O = Organic Foods and Oil

- Since most fruits and vegetables are grown with pesticides, it is best to buy organic products. Some foods that use the most pesticides include strawberries, spinach, red/green peppers, cherries, and peaches.
- Organic foods have more pests and thus a different risk of contamination. **Wash them!**
- Cook with a variety of healthy oils, such as olive, canola, safflower, etc. These have lots of important and essential fatty acids that are good for kids.

P = Presentation and Praise

- Creative food presentation encourages kids to try new foods. For example, try unusual shapes, special containers, garnishes or dips (guacamole, cottage cheese, yogurt), toppings (raisins, nuts), and decorations.
- Praise a child’s wise food choices and willingness to try new foods.
- Never praise a child for finishing his or her entire plate.

Q = Queen/King for a Day

- Frequent meal celebrations, ethnic themes, and decorations help to make mealtime fun and also encourage variety.

R = Regular Exercise

- Developing an active lifestyle as a child leads to the lifelong enjoyment of healthy activities and better health for both parents and children.
- Do something active as a family at least once every weekend and, preferably, three times per week. Walk, ride bikes, go to the beach, swim, ski, roller skate, ride scooters, or play ball.

S = Small Serving Sizes, Skinny Children, and Soda

- Children need to eat **much less** than we think!
- **Offer small servings** and do not force children to eat or to clean their plates.
- Many kids today are overweight. Normal children often appear too skinny by comparison when their weight is actually just right. Don't worry unless your doctor says you should. Please do not force kids to eat; it develops bad habits that can lead to obesity later on in life.
- Avoid soda! It is full of sugar and calories and causes cavities.

T = Treats, Toppings, and Trans Fat

- Treats do not always have to be bad for you (for example, try berries or fruit smoothies).
- Toppings can make healthy foods fun (raisins, granola, nuts, etc.).
- **Avoid trans fat.** (Avoid packaged baked goods.)

U = “Underwhelm” and Use Mealtimes Well

- Tiny people have tiny tummies, so serve small amounts and let them ask for more.
- Eat together as a family on a regular basis. This encourages healthy attitudes towards food and offers an opportunity to connect and share your family values.

V = Vitamins and Vegetables

- Daily multivitamins with iron and calcium are a good idea as insurance for picky eaters (try PolyViSol for children who need a liquid and a chewable multivitamin for ages three to seven).
- Children should have at least three vegetables each day. Be creative, but remember that French fries do not count!

W = Water

- Teach kids to like water at an early age.
- Offer two to four ounces of water each day starting at two to four months of age. Do not offer juice until at least age two.
- School age kids need at least 32 ounces of water each day.
- Put water in lunches instead of juice (individual water bottles or SportTops make it fun).

Y = Yogurt

- Yogurt is a great source of calcium.
- Frozen yogurt is a healthy alternative to ice cream.
- Eating plenty of calcium daily is thought to help maintain normal weight, and it also builds strong teeth and bones.

Z = Zinc

- Not enough zinc is a common deficiency in kids and can lead to growth and skin problems.
- The best sources of zinc are lean red meat and egg yolks.
- Other sources of zinc include dark chicken meat, hard cheeses, beans, peas, peanut butter, and fortified cereals.