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Amy's Green Kitchen | posted August 31, 2004

Setting Lifelong Eating Habits

by Amy Topel

Filed under: Green diet, Recipes, Child Health

If you are an average American adult, you probably feel that you should be eating better. Can you easily name three things you'd like to change? I can. I'd like to eat more slowly, not feel compelled to eat everything that is put in front of me and I know I'd be better off if I didn't skip breakfast so often. If you feel that your eating habits leave something to be desired, you're not alone, and as many of us know, trying to change these ingrained behaviors is a never-ending battle.

By the time we reach adulthood, unhealthy food practices can be embedded in our subconscious mind and we must work hard to overcome these ingrained behaviors. Since rooting out bad habits is so difficult, the key for our children is to foster healthy habits as they grow up.

The great thing about kids is that they follow your lead and the bad thing about kids is that they follow your lead. If you take the time to teach your kids to be courteous to others, chances are they'll be considerate adults. If you teach your kids to have an unhealthy relationship to food, studies are beginning to show that they probably will.

We nag our kids to wash their hands after going to the bathroom, grill them on looking both ways before crossing the street and constantly remind them to say please, thank you and excuse me, coaching them until they perform these actions unconsciously. Parents

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understand the importance of enforcing behaviors so they become habitual and yet many of us do not think about the eating habits that we are instilling in our kids everyday.

Habits to Instill

Establish set meal times. Most of us have seen the studies that show that kids that eat breakfast perform better academically but did you know that adults that eat regularly eat breakfast weigh less than those that don't? You can influence whether or not your kids are over-weight adults by sitting down to breakfast with them every morning.

Encourage healthy snacks. Snacking is a component of a balanced diet, as long as the snack foods are nutrient dense. In fact, snacking can be a good way to increase variety in a child's diet. Fruit, nuts and complex carbohydrates like bean salads or whole grain crackers make great snacks for kids. When a kid gets home from school and they're hungry, they are going to reach for the first thing they can get their hands on - if that's fruit salad great - if it is a bag of corn chips they've just ingested far more fat, salt and empty calories than they need. Make sure to fill the refrigerator and cabinets with healthy foods that kids can access easily.

Teach your kids to enjoy a wide array of healthy foods. Research shows that children learn to like foods that they are repeatedly exposed to. This means they will learn to like TV dinners or sautéed kale depending on which you feed them. Don't fall prey to the maxim that kids don't like vegetables, provide them with delicious healthy foods to eat and they will.

We all know that children do as we do, so model healthy eating for your child. There is ample evidence that portion sizes in the US are dramatically increasing each year. When eating with your children, serve small portions for everyone at the table allowing your family to take more food if they are still hungry. It is critical that your kids see you engaging in healthy behavior, while outside influences have some affect, kids are still imprinted with their parents eating style.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Avoid using food as a reward or a punishment. A 2003 study published in the journal Eating Behaviors shows a correlation between adolescent bulimia and food used as a reward. The same study shows that adult obesity can be linked to parents exhortations that children clean their plates, and offered some evidence that total

restriction of certain foods leads to increased desire for those foods. Instead of using food as a control mechanism, teach children that food is nourishment and that we eat to sustain our bodies.

At mealtime, you are responsible to decide which foods to offer your kids to eat, but they should decide how much to eat. Children have smaller stomachs than adults and generally need to eat smaller, more frequent meals. Although it can be infuriating to watch a child dawdle over a meal, ultimately we must teach them to listen to their bodies and eat only as much as they need. Studies have shown that children who are told how much to eat by their parents, lose the ability to decide for themselves when they have eaten enough.

As another school year begins, you may be aware of the fact that your children will be eating more meals away from home. While you may not have control over what kids eat at school, you still have an impact at home. Make sure to provide a wide array of foods that are suitable after-school snacks, model proper portion control at the dinner table and no matter how hectic your mornings are - try to sit down to a healthy breakfast. The steps you take today can instill good habits for your children that will last a lifetime.

The following recipes were graciously provided by Alexandra Jamieson. A graduate of New York's Natural Gourmet Cookery School, Ms. Jamieson has worked in Italy, creating seasonal and vegan menus, as a pastry chef at New York's Other Foods, and as the vegetarian chef at Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp. A holistic health counselor and personal chef, Ms. Jamieson also caters parties. If you would like more information check out her website at www.healthychefalex.com.

Rice and Berry Pudding*

Serves 2

Ingredients

1 cup cooked brown rice
1/2 cup mixed berries
1/4 tsp cinnamon
1/4 tsp nutmeg
3 tsp maple syrup or brown rice syrup
1/2 cup hot soy milk

Method

Divide brown rice and berries into two bowls. Sprinkle with cinnamon, nutmeg and sweetener. Pour the hot soy milk around the rice. If using leftover grains, heat the milk, sweetener, spices and grains together over

medium-low heat until heated through. Add berries before serving.

Popcorn Soup*

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
1 medium yellow onion, medium dice
1 garlic clove, minced
6 cups vegetable stock
2 tsp fresh thyme
3 cups mashed potatoes
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
Salt and pepper to taste
2 cups fresh popped popcorn

Method

Heat a large heavy saucepan over medium-high heat. Add the olive oil and sauté the onion and garlic with a pinch of salt for 4 minutes. Stir in the stock and thyme and bring to a boil, stirring occasionally. Stir in the potatoes 1 cup at a time. Bring to a low simmer and stir in the lemon juice. Season with additional salt and pepper. Serve in individual bowls, garnished with popcorn.

Purple Power Smoothie*

Serves 4

Ingredients

1 cup blueberries
1/4 cup natural, unsweetened nut butter (try pecan or almond!)
1 banana
3 cups vanilla soy milk
1 teaspoon. vitamin C powder

Method

Combine all ingredients in a blender and mix until smooth. Pour into individual glasses and serve with a thick straw.

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