

Healthy habits for healthy families



Over the last 30 years, the rate of childhood obesity has tripled, according to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).¹ More than a third of children and teens are now overweight or obese. And unhealthy eating habits can continue into adulthood.

Luckily, parents and caregivers can help jumpstart and then sustain a healthy lifestyle for children and adolescents.

A model of good behavior

You play an important role as guide and coach for your children as they make choices about eating.

And the effect your actions have can be profound. For example, [research](#) has shown that just eating together as a family can improve children's nutritional health.² In families who shared at least three meals a week, children were 24 percent more likely to be eating healthy foods than those in families who ate few or no meals together. The children were also 12 percent less likely to be overweight, 20 percent less likely to eat unhealthy foods and 35 percent less likely to engage in dangerous weight-loss efforts like purging, taking diet pills and laxatives, or vomiting. Although the researchers don't know for sure why family meals are so effective, they note that homemade meals are typically lower calorie. Plus, eating together lets adults model good behavior and intervene when behaviors threaten to become bad habits.

Those family meals shouldn't include the television, however. That's because children who regularly watch TV during meals have healthier diets. In [one study](#), for example, children whose families rarely or never turned on the TV during family meals were less likely to eat chips, soda and other junk foods.³

Making dinner time a family event, even if the meal is something simple, encourages a healthy attitude toward eating.

What you can do

Try these tips for helping your child develop healthy eating habits:

- **Start early.** If you help your child establish good eating, exercising and sleeping habits early in life, you won't have to break bad habits later on. Expose your child to a variety of flavors and pair those new sensations with positive contexts and foods that your child already likes. [Research](#) suggests that familiarization can not only help children come to accept healthy food but actually prefer it.⁴
- **Ensure that most foods in your home are healthy.** You don't have to swear off desserts, however. Low-fat frozen yogurt and fruit are a good alternative to ice cream and sprinkles, for instance.
- **Make healthy eating easy.** Children generally choose foods that are familiar, easily available and ready to be eaten. Encourage your child or teen to eat more fruits and vegetables by making them just as convenient as sugary snacks. You could place baby carrots in small bags on an easily accessible shelf in the refrigerator, for example.
- **Model healthy eating.** Children who see their parents or caregivers buying, cooking and eating healthy foods are more apt to eat healthy foods themselves. Avoid using food as a reward for good behavior. Making unhealthy food a reward for good deeds promotes the idea that healthy food isn't as appealing as junk food or something to look forward to. Healthy eating doesn't need to be a trick. Instead, teach your children to look at healthy foods as tasty and desirable.
- **Have meals as a family.** Family meals are not only a good opportunity to share in your children's lives. They are also the perfect venue to talk about healthy eating habits and engage your children in conversations about what a healthy meal looks and tastes like. Limit eating out. Eating out is not only expensive, but can also be unhealthy. Not knowing what goes into the food you're eating can make it difficult to help your child choose something that is nutritious and appropriately sized.

How a psychologist can help

If you need help ensuring a healthy diet for your child or adolescent, [consult with a psychologist](#) or other licensed mental health professional. He or she can help you identify problem areas and then develop a plan for changing them.

Practicing psychologists are experts in behavior change and use a variety of evidence-based techniques and treatments to help people improve their lives. Psychologists, who have doctoral degrees, receive one of the highest levels of education of any health care professionals. On average, they spend seven years in education and training following their undergraduate degrees. **The American Psychological Association gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Jana Martin, PhD, Kirsten Davison, PhD, and Mary Alvord, PhD, in developing this fact sheet.**

References

- ¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). "Childhood obesity facts."
- ² Hammons, A.J., & Fiese, B.H. (2011). "Is frequency of shared family meals related to the nutritional health of children and adolescents?" *Pediatrics*, 127 (6): 1565-1574.
- ³ Andaya, A.A., Arredondo, E.M., Alcaraz, J.E., Lindsay, S.P., & Elder, J.P. (2011). "The association between family meals, TV viewing during meals, and fruit, vegetables, soda, and chips intake among Latino children." *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 43 (5): 308-315.
- ⁴ Birch, L.L., & Anzman-Frasca, S. (2011). "Promoting children's healthy eating in obesogenic environments: Lessons learned from the rat." *Physiology and Behavior*, 104 (4): 641-645.

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