

Parents' Influence on Children's Eating Habits



As a parent or caregiver, you play an important role in shaping your children's eating habits. You have a big influence over the family environment where meals take place and the types of foods your children eat. Positive experiences about food early on may help your children develop healthy eating habits later in life. Read on to learn how to positively influence your children's eating habits by creating a positive eating environment and being a good role model.

Creating a positive eating environment

Family meals take place in the home (or the "eating environment"). This eating environment can help create a positive impact on your children's eating habits. Here are a few tips to help you create a positive eating environment for your children.

Have regular meal and snack times

Having regular meal and snack times everyday creates a healthy routine. If children snack right before meals or fill up on beverages like milk or plant-based beverages, they may not be hungry when it's time to eat, which can impact the foods they choose to eat at mealtime. Plan to offer a meal or snack every 2 to 3 hours during the day. If your child says they are hungry before the scheduled meal or snack, offer nutritious foods like cut up veggies or fruit.

Eat together as a family

Children who eat meals with their family tend to eat healthier foods like fruits, vegetables and whole grains. They are also more likely to maintain a healthy body weight. The importance of family meals goes beyond nutrition. Research shows that eating meals with family members also has many other benefits like increased vocabulary in young children and decreased risk for substance abuse in teenagers. It may be difficult to plan family meals with busy schedules - start by planning a few family meals during the week when you are less busy, like on weekends.

Try themed meals to get your kids excited about coming to the dinner table. Some ideas to try:

- Picnic-style meal - offer a variety of finger foods like veggies, fruit, whole grain crackers, cheese, nuts and seeds. Lay a blanket in the living room to enjoy the meal together.
- Make your own [Funny Face Pizza](#) night
- Colour theme nights - like "green" night where you serve only green foods. Try these [Green Meatballs](#) served with [Pea Shoot Pesto Pasta](#) and [Ground Up Frog Smoothies](#)

Avoid pressuring your children to eat

Insisting that your children eat certain foods may actually cause them to eat less. Let your children decide how much to eat at meals and snacks based on how hungry they feel. Are mealtimes a struggle? Say [goodbye to picky eating](#) with these tips.

Avoid using food as a reward or punishment

Using food as a reward or punishment may lead to unhealthy eating habits. Offer a variety of nutritious foods at meal and snack times and let your children serve themselves without any pressure. Try not to label foods as "good" or "bad" or "healthy" and "unhealthy."

Have healthy foods at home

The foods available in your fridge, freezer, cupboards and pantry are what your children will get used to eating. Use this [menu planning form](#) to help you plan nutritious meals as a family!

Being a positive role model

Parents can influence their children's eating habits in a positive way by being a good role model. Here are some tips on how to be a good role model when it comes to food.

Make healthy foods the usual choice

What you eat sets an example for what your children will eat. Enjoy foods from [Canada's Food Guide](#) every day such as vegetables, fruit, whole grain products and protein foods like beans, nuts and seeds, tofu, eggs, fish, lean meats, yogurt and milk. When your children see you eating these foods, they are more likely to want to eat them too.

Limit foods high in calories, fat, sugar and salt

When buying packaged foods, compare labels and choose foods lower in saturated fat, sugar and salt. Check out this article for tips on [label reading](#).

Try making baked goods and snacks yourself. When you prepare your own, you can reduce the amount of sugar, saturated fat and salt used. Make a big batch and freeze portions individually for a quick addition to school lunches or for an after school snack. Try these [Sunny Energy Bites](#), [Granola and Fruit Bites](#) or [Flying Saucer Muffins](#).

Try some of these kid-friendly recipes:

[Yogurt Granola Mountain](#)

[Apple Cinnamon Baked Oatmeal](#)

[Mini Meatballs](#)

[Mango Black Bean Salad](#)

[Sweet and Crunchy Carrot Salad](#)

How can a dietitian help?

A [dietitian](#) will help make sure your child is getting important nutrients like protein, fibre, iron and calcium that your child needs to grow and be healthy. Your dietitian will make suggestions on how to boost the nutrition of the foods they are already eating and give you a plan on how to introduce new ones. They can also help you plan balanced school lunches and help you with reading labels. [Connect with a dietitian today!](#)

Bottom line

As a parent or caregiver, you have an important role in shaping your children's eating habits. By creating a positive eating environment and being a good role model, you can help your children develop healthy eating habits that can make a lasting impact on their health.

You may also be interested in:

[Help my child won't eat enough vegetables and fruit](#)

[Managing family meals](#)

[The importance of family meals and no TV](#)

[Cooking with KidsTop 5 Reasons to See a Dietitian](#)

This article was written and reviewed by dietitians from Dietitians of Canada. The advice in this article is intended as general information and should not replace advice given by your dietitian or healthcare provider.

Last Update – June 14, 2022