

Pediatricians' Role to Promote Healthy Nutrition and Decrease Child Obesity

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Childhood obesity has become a worrisome national health problem. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that the average 19 year-old weighed 159.7 pounds in 1971 and today the average is 14 pounds more for males and 20 pounds more for females. Obesity is becoming a concern among children at younger and younger ages. Yet 'fast food' places are everywhere, often the eating place of choice, tempting harried parents whose working lives leave little time for careful food shopping and preparation.

Children's early tastes and choices for foods depend on family preferences and styles, ease of or scarcity of access to fresh foods, cultural practices, and frequent family recourse to 'junk food', with empty calories, due to family lack of time for food preparation. In the uphill battle against growing obesity among children, pediatricians have an essential role to play to help families start the very young on the path toward healthy food choices and eating practices.

Provide Pamphlets for Parents to Learn about Nutrition Guidelines

Help parents learn about food groups and federal guidelines for nutrition; these include daily five servings of vegetable/ fruit portions. Remind parents about the importance of foods with dietary fiber, including many sources often discarded, such as the skins of baked potatoes. Praise parents who are trying to cut down on sugary beverages and who do remember to provide lots of water to keep children in hot weather well hydrated.

Share research about obesity with parents. Parents may be interested to learn that researchers on childhood obesity have shown that sitting long hours in front of the TV set is more strongly associated with obesity for both boys and girls, than any other sitting activity, such as a car ride or playing a video game (<http://www.utiliza.edu.au/Media-Celestes/2019/sitting-in-front-of-the-tv-puts-kids-at-risk-in-the-obesity-hotseat/#.XMBjw6QpBe1>).

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Encourage Parents to Engage Children in Grocery Shopping for Healthy Foods

Explain that while grocery shopping, parents will enjoy talking with their child about how to choose fresh vegetables and fruits. Parents can point out shiny smooth skins and no brown spots on the freshest green or yellow peppers, or smooth rather than wrinkled skin on apples. Seated safely in a grocery cart, children can play "I spy!" as a parent cruises the aisles of fresh produce. Can the child point out sweet potatoes? Greenbeans? Canteloupes? While learning the names for foods, young children sharpen their perceptual and cognitive as well as verbal skills. Children can be the first to point out and tell a parent that they spy celery stalks that the adult has been searching for in order to serve crunchy celery pieces with cream cheese when children need a healthy snack.

Parents can encourage children to learn comparative size names (little, bigger, biggest) as they point out teeny cherry tomatoes or moderate size tomatoes on the vine, or huge beefsteak tomatoes. Which kinds do the children seem to enjoy most? Children learn how many different varieties there are of some foods, such as pears which may have bright green or chocolate brown skins. Parents place healthy fruits and vegetables, that they have chosen for their shopping list, into the grocery cart as children call out the healthy produce they have noticed as they play "I spy".

Remind parents that they *enhance a child's thinking skills* as they point out healthy foods. Ask them to find out whether their little one notices bananas with very green or with deep yellow skins. Is their child able to figure out which ones are ready to eat, and which ones need to rest for days until they ripen? How proud a parent feels when a child is a "good detective" and declares firmly that the green bananas are the unripe ones and the yellow ones will taste good to eat.

Suggest that Parents Involve Youngsters in Safe Food Preparation Tasks

Children practice fine motor skills as, with clean hands, they tear lettuce leaves into small pieces for a salad bowl. They learn skillful eye-hand-coordination as they carefully crack an egg over a mixing bowl and separate out the whites and the yolks, so together with the parent they are helping to prepare the ingredients for a favorite recipe. Young children love to pound down yeasty dough and watch it rise over and over until the dough is ready for baking. A small child may want to learn to braid his own tiny loaf to bake alongside the parent's braided loaf. Children love to take well-cooked apples, turn the handle of a food mill to grind the apples into applesauce, and then add some brown sugar and a small dash of cinnamon. How proud a toddler feels to have helped prepare this very special yummy dessert dish!

Suggest Ways for Eating Together as a Family

Breakfast, consisting of a glass of orange juice, and a bowl of non-sugary cereal with milk and berries, is a good time for family members to eat together. If parents set out utensils, bowls, and cereal boxes the night before, this will cut down on hurried rushing around to serve breakfast in the morning. Parents may be glad to learn that eggs, a high protein food, when served for breakfast, can help their school-age children avoid fatigue and lack of classroom alertness that sometimes are reported prior to the school noon lunch hour.

Eating dinners together does present a special challenge in busy families. This may well take special planning if a parent has to ferry children to varied sports or other activities in the afternoons. Help parents understand that eating-together times need to be peaceful for good digestion. Remind parents that nagging only makes a child's tummy churn. Nagging or forcing does not make a person want to eat something! Serving a tiny bit of a new food can be helpful if the family rule is to have a child taste a new food. Some children need many such small tastings before becoming comfortable with a strange new food. Other children do take to a new food right away. One preschooler, tasting eggplant, remarked to his dad, who had cooked the dish, that it "tasted like that squash you made last time".

Encourage parents to engage children during mealtimes in sharing stories of the day's events. At times, they may even want to reminisce about summer family picnics or outings - even those with a mishap, such as ants getting into the picnic sandwiches - an event amusing to recall later but a big nuisance when that happened.

Remind Parents How Powerful they are as Models for Good Nutrition Habits

One mom followed her preschooler throughout the apartment threatening "You must drink your milk. That's a must!" . She said this even though the mom had told her home visitor how she herself detested milk! And indeed, some persons are lactose intolerant. Be creative. If milk doesn't appeal, can parents think of appealing substitute dairy products with calcium and Vitamin D added, such as yoghurts or cheese sticks?

Serve Small Portions for Small Children

Some families, accustomed culturally to hearty eating, need a reminder to set out small portions that a very young child can manage. One child refused to drink milk. The glass seemed so huge and tall to him! When grandpa creatively decided to pour some milk into a tiny shot glass for him, the child giggled, drank the milk down in a gulp and demanded "More tiny glass !" Large size portions intimidate some children. Start with small servings. Have bowls of extras on the table and serving spoons with scoops so a child can take another serving if wanted. Parents will need to remember that wrist control may not be in place until 18 to 24 months, so they will be sure to use ladles that a toddler can manage in order to scoop up another serving to eat. If a parent sets out a few Cheerios for a baby to munch while baby practices using thumb and forefinger skills, then that is also a good time to teach baby the easy sign language sign for "More". A preverbal baby feels so pleased to be able to communicate wishes and also feels empowered to get munching needs met.

Alert parents to tune into any sensory integration troubles that may cause distress at meal time. Some children feel upset if two different foods touch on a plate. One child loved pasta, but never with sauce. Her brother wanted lots of sauce and 'sprinkle cheese' on top. Some parents complain to the pediatrician that their child is a 'picky eater'. That child may have been pressured to finish everything on the plate. Serving small portions can help ease this worry. Sometimes, early on, parents hold baby's hands down while spoon feeding, and do not allow baby the messy pleasure of self-feeding that does indeed require later adult cleanups - of face and floor. Babies are messy at mealtimes; parents need to understand that learning neat eating will take time and practice.

When experimenters offered young children the choice to eat their own salad or dessert they had made, rather than one already prepared, then 'picky eaters' ate more of the salad that they themselves had prepared (<http://www.childtrends.org/videos/help/for/picky/eaters/and-their-parents-too>). Active child involvement in getting foods ready for a meal may help decrease 'picky eating'. Sometimes making a colorful smoothie drink of fruits a child has rejected can tempt a child to try that drink.

Help Parents Understand Why Some Children Steal Food or Overeat

Children have different appetites. Parents need to learn about each child in the family to make sure they are not over-stuffing a child who has a small appetite, and thus creating an eating problem. Nor are they depriving a very active athletic child from eating enough for that child's energy needs.

Some children who have had a sorrowful family loss of someone special, or who feel emotionally deprived, will eat compulsively, in order to fill up gnawing feelings of emotional emptiness. A child who overeats and becomes obese may feel misunderstood, bullied at school, not valued, or not cherished as much as a smarter or more sociable or more athletic sibling.

One little girl (who often snatched chocolates from her parent's stash of candies) was overweight. Adults criticized her hesitations and lack of fluency as she was learning to read aloud, by asking her "Why don't you read as well as your sister did when she was your age?" Furtive snacking to make up for not-OK feelings about the self can lead to obesity, dental problems, shaming and ridicule from classmates, and even lead to diabetes. Suggest parents set out healthy snacks their hungry older children can nibble on, such as a bowl of baby carrots or a dish full of green peas a child can shell easily and then munch on the tiny peas.

Conclusion

Healthy foods help a child flourish physically, mentally, and emotionally. Because food habits develop so early in life, pedi-

atricians are essential, as trusted family doctors, to guide parents and actively work to prevent later child obesity by encouraging families to make healthy nutrition choices very early in a child's life, as well as making such choices attractive and appetizing for young children.

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