

Healthy Lifestyle = Healthy Happy Children

Setting examples in your own diet and activity behavior can be the most effective way to send the message to your kids: Being healthy and happy means living healthy through eating well and staying active!

We all know that obesity has grown to epidemic proportions. Nationally, two-thirds of adults and nearly one-third of children and teens are currently overweight or obese. Since 1980 the number of obese adults has doubled. Since 1970, the number of obese children ages 6 to 11 has quadrupled, and the number of obese adolescents ages 12 to 19 has tripled.



These alarming increases in obesity rates show us that much has changed in our society and it has become harder for children and families to eat well and stay active.

Our days are overscheduled. Healthy food is sometimes unavailable and/or unaffordable. There is an abundance of fast and convenient foods and a lack of time and safe places to exercise. Additionally we are bombarded by the media which continues to purport the advantages of feeding your family on processed, convenient and inexpensive foods. Most do not know that the food industry is the second largest advertiser next to the automobile industry or that Ronald McDonald is one of the most widely known child icons in the world second only to Santa Claus. With challenges such as these, it is no wonder that everyday can seem like a "food fight"!

In addition to these dietary challenges, which contribute to an excess of energy input, there is the lack of exercise for children and adults in today's fast-paced, fast food environment. Inactivity has reached its own epidemic level. Children today are less active than they were years ago due to factors that include less participation in

daily physical education classes at school and the lack of safe places to exercise, particularly in urban areas. Additionally children watch TV or play sedentary video games on the TV or computer for hours. Sadly enough, the number of children who watch five or more hours of television per day has increased over the years, decreasing energy output which puts them at serious risk for becoming overweight.

What can you do as concerned parents? Here are some basic principles to help you navigate the environment and keep your kids and yourself healthy:

- **Don't skip meals.** Make sure you and your children are eating at least three meals daily. All meals are important but breakfast sets the tone for the day. Without breakfast, it is hard for kids to eat enough throughout the day to obtain the nutrients they need to grow, learn and play. Children who eat breakfast are more alert and perform better on school tests than children who do not. Kids who eat breakfast are also more



creative and energetic. Eating regularly throughout the day helps keep our appetites under control. We are less inclined to overeat or make the wrong choices when we do eat. Healthy snacks are another great way to meet daily nutrient requirements

that may be missing at meal times.

- **Eat a variety of foods and keep your meals and snacks well-balanced.** Eating more variety means getting more nutrients. Choose protein and "good fat" foods that provide your child with slow burning fuels like grilled chicken, peanut butter and low fat cheese. Protein rich foods are necessary for growth and development. Balance these with carbohydrates that burn a little quicker but are necessary for energy. Good choices are fruits and whole grain breads. Some foods, such as fortified low fat milk and yogurt, contain both protein and complex carbohydrates.



drates. These dairy foods are also rich sources of calcium and vitamin D, necessary for bone development.

• **Offer your children fruits and vegetables daily.** Children are naturally curious and big copycats. If they see a variety of foods on the table or on your plate, they will be inclined to try them. Fruits and vegetables are loaded with necessary vitamins and minerals such as vitamin C and many of the B vitamins, as well as fiber. They also contain antioxidants which help fight cancer. Variety is important as each color has its own benefit in preventing cell and tissue damage.

• **Keep your grains whole.** Whole grains provide fiber as well as cancer fighting properties. They keep your family healthy and regular while providing necessary complex carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. The more fiber your carbs have, the more complex it is. The more complex your carbs, the healthier you and your kids will be. Simple sugars are found in sweetened beverages like sodas, sweetened punches and ices teas. Many sugar-coated dry cereals are low in fiber and high in added simple sugars. These items can add many extra calories to your diet with few if any nutrients. And don't be fooled by juices. Many claim to be 100 percent fruit juice and full of vitamins and minerals. Although this may be true, they are still laden with calories without the benefit of fiber. It is better

to eat your fruit than to drink it.

• **Not all fats and oils are created equal.** Dietary fat has suffered from a bad reputation in the past. The truth is that the right type of fat in the right amount is not only very good for you, but necessary in your diet. It helps keep your skin, hair and nails from getting dry, and it helps keep

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your appetite satisfied. It is also necessary for the absorption of vitamins, A, D, E and K which are our fat soluble vitamins. The key is choosing moderate amounts of those oils we get from fish, nuts and plants such as soy, corn and olives. Also beware of hydrogenated oils. These fats also known as "trans fats" can be very unhealthy for your heart.

• **Keep active as a family.** Children who enjoy exercise may develop a lifelong,

healthy habit of being physically active. If they stay active as children and remain active as adults, they will enjoy better health and may live longer than their less active peers. Physical activity can decrease the risk of obesity, cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease among adults. People who remain active on a regular basis tend to live longer than people who are not regularly active. Be active as a family whether you go for a walk, play catch or set up a home gym using household items such as canned foods as weights and the stairs as a substitute stair climber.

• **Set aside some time to be active.** It really doesn't matter what the activity is. Fun is the motivator for kids and adults as well, so try and find something everyone likes to do. Adults need at least 30 minutes a day of physical activity most days of the week to be healthy. This increases with age. Children need 60 minutes every day or most days.

• **Limit TV time.** Try and keep your child's TV and computer time to less than two hours a day. Homework at the computer counts!

• **Try having parties and gifts that center around physical activities.** This can be swimming, gymnastics, bowling, skating or anything that your child has an interest in. This will help you to reinforce your message that staying active is important for each wonderful year of their lives.

Staying healthy is not easy in today's society. It is difficult as adults to eat well and stay active and just as difficult for our children. In spite of the challenges, it is important to remember that getting your kids to adopt a healthy lifestyle starts with you. Setting examples in your own diet and activity behavior can be the most effective way to send the message to your kids: Being healthy and happy means living healthy through eating well and staying active! •

HEALTHY CHOICES, HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

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