

10 Ways to Get Kids to Eat Healthier

1. **Model healthy eating.** One of the most important actions adults can take to help children eat healthier is to eat healthier themselves.
2. **Eat together.** In the era of single parenting and two-parent working families, multiple extracurricular activities to coordinate, and overall hectic lifestyles, family meals are on the decline. Not only are family meals generally more nutritious for children, eating together also offers an opportunity to socialize about food and eating, and model healthy behaviors. Even if it is only twice a week, planning family meals into a weekly routine goes a long way toward helping children to develop healthier eating habits.
3. **Increase exposure to healthy foods.** One of the best ways that parents can help their children develop healthy eating habits is to repeatedly expose them to a wide variety of foods. While children may not accept the novel food on the first try, with repeated attempts and familiarity with the food, they will be more likely to develop a preference for it.
4. **Let them choose the portion size.** Adults can empower children to let their internal cues of hunger and fullness guide how much they eat by allowing children to choose their own portion sizes. Adults typically offer too-big portion sizes and then require kids to “clean their plates.” This scenario sets the stage for overeating. Similar to adults, kids will eat more food when portion sizes are big. When adults force them to finish these oversized portions, children learn to override their internal hunger cues and develop a tendency for overeating. On the other hand, several studies have shown that when kids are allowed to choose their own portions, they tend to choose appropriate portion sizes and they eat less.
5. **Share the control.** Several studies have shown that when a child is allowed to self-regulate food intake, free of any adult pressure or influence, total caloric intake and nutritional value differ only minimally from day to day. On the other hand, encouraging children to eat by focusing on the amount of food left on the plate promotes more food intake and makes children less able to self-regulate caloric intake. Several studies have also confirmed that requiring a child to consume a particular food to receive a “reward” such as a dessert, led to increased dislike of the food that child was required to eat and increased liking of the typically unhealthy “reward” food. Higher levels of parental control and pressure to eat are associated with lower fruit and vegetable intake and higher intake of dietary fat.

6. **Refuse to be a “short order” cook.** Picky eaters can wreak havoc on an enjoyable family meal, compelling some parents to make special accommodations for each child just so everyone will have something that they will eat. Parents can promote healthier eating by refusing to accommodate special request, while at the same time making sure to serve at least one healthy food that the child likes at each mealtime.
7. **Limit television time.** While television viewing has been associated with a variety of negative behaviors including poor school performance and childhood obesity, it is also linked to overall worse nutrition. They may largely be due to the enormous amount of advertising for unhealthy food such as sugary breakfast cereals, soft drinks, candy salty snack products, and highly processed and fast foods. Research has shown that exposure to advertisements for food products increases children’s choice of, and preference for, these advertised foods.
8. **Exploit similarities.** Once a food is accepted, find similarly colored or flavored “food bridges” to expand to variety of foods a child will eat. For example, if a child likes pumpkin pie, try mashed sweet potatoes, and then mashed carrots.
9. **Making eating healthy fun.** Despite its accompanying demands, stresses, mistakes and disappointments, parenting is supposed to be fun. Parents should try to take a break from the mealtime battles, and take advantage of a child’s wonderment of the world to teach a lesson about health and fitness.
10. **Skip the food fights.** The more parents pressure their children to eat certain foods, the less likely they will develop a taste for them and continue to eat them as often as an adult. If parents want to get their kids to eat vegetables and other healthy foods because the kids like them, then parents have to employ different strategies—increasing accessibility and exposure, minimizing the competition, modeling, vowing to not say anything when a child refuses a food, and helping make food taste good, for starters. In short, skip the food fights!

- Excerpt from Fitness Matters (*American Council on Exercise*)