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Helping Kids Maintain a Healthy Body Weight: A Cheat Sheet for Success



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When children are young, parents and other caregivers are responsible for providing an environment that helps them maintain a lifestyle that is beneficial to their health. You can help your child by doing the following:

- Be a positive role model for healthful eating and activity habits.
- Provide a calm, reassuring atmosphere at regular meal and snack times.
- Set appropriate limits on screen entertainment like television, tablets and video games.
- Involve the whole family in fun physical activities.
- Help children develop and maintain a positive body image.
- Avoid restrictive diets and excessive exercise regimens.

When it comes to nutrition and fitness, the role of parents is the same no matter the size of their children. A healthy weight for kids is about much more than numbers. It is about healthy

behaviors, such as enjoying a variety of foods and activities for strength, flexibility and aerobic capacity.

Diets Are Not the Answer

harm than good. Research suggests kids who diet end up weighing more than non-dieters, with lower self-esteem and greater risk for eating disorders. Do not put your child on a diet, especially without consulting your doctor and a registered dietitian nutritionist.

Here are some simple actions adults can take to help children develop positive lifestyle habits. These strategies have been shown to promote a healthy weight for adults, too

- **Be active by playing together.** Kids need at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity. Play with your kids every day. It's fun for them and fun for you too. Consider checking out your local community center for kid-friendly activities. Plan family activities that get everyone moving such as biking, after-dinner walks, basketball or soccer at the park.
- **Make family mealtimes a special time together.** Eating more meals together can make a big difference in your family's health, happiness and finances. Dinners made at home are less costly than eating out and easier to prepare than you might think.
- **Eat breakfast.** Go beyond cereal and milk and try a breakfast burrito made with a scrambled egg, cheese and salsa wrapped in a flour tortilla. Also, teach kids to use the blender to make their own breakfast smoothie or serve a yogurt bar with low-fat plain or vanilla-flavored yogurt. Add toppings like whole grain cereal, dried fruit and unsalted nuts.
- **Don't forbid foods or use food as a reward.** Forbidding foods only increases a child's desire for that food. Instead of saying no to your child's favorite food, limit the portion size. Use non-food rewards for good behavior such as stickers or allowing your child to have a friend over to play.
- **Dine out responsibly.** When dining at a restaurant, look for nutritious options on the children's menu such as a grilled chicken wrap, carrots with dip and fruit. If you order takeout or home delivery, remember that you can add to the meal by serving a glass of low-fat milk or adding a side salad.
- **Enjoy a rainbow of fruits and vegetables.** Most children beyond age 4 need at least 1½ cups of fruit and 1 ½ to 2 ½ cups of vegetables a day. Serve juicy, crunchy, delicious fruits and vegetables at every meal and snack. Fresh, frozen, dried and canned — all types of produce contribute to good health. You can make produce fun by serving frozen grapes, vegetable kebabs or strawberry-topped frozen yogurt. Some kids dislike bitter or strong flavored veggies so keep it simple by serving steamed broccoli or cauliflower. Expand raw veggies and dip choices by steaming green beans and zucchini and serving them cold along with baby carrots, celery and cucumbers.
- **Encourage mindful eating.** Ban screens at meal time and help kids focus on their food by being present at the dinner table. Ask your kids what it feels like to be very hungry, a

little bit hungry, comfortably full and uncomfortably full. Discuss the importance of trusting and listening to internal body cues.

- **Choose healthful beverages.** Soft drinks, fruit punch and fruit drinks contain added sugars which could be displacing nutritious beverages. Offer healthier drinks like plain milk and water instead.
- **Remove televisions and video games from bedrooms.** Kids who get enough sleep are more likely to maintain a healthy weight and perform better in school. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no television in children's rooms to reduce screen time and promote healthy sleep habits.