

Good Food Goals: Help Kids Eat Healthier

Are your family dinners usually coming out of take-out bags these days? Or can you not remember the last time you even had dinner together?

It matters. The food you and your kids eat drives how you feel and think each day. It's the fuel that keeps your bodies going when you want to get some exercise or focus your brain at work or in school.

It's time to hit the reset button on your family's eating habits. That means your whole family needs to make some changes, says Natalie Muth, MD, a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics. But where to begin? Set one or two goals and see how your family does. Here are some good ways to get started.

Goal 1: More Healthy Food at Home

Create an environment where your kids make healthy choices naturally, without any nagging from you.

Stock your kitchen with healthy foods. If you don't want your kids to eat junk food, don't put it in your shopping cart. Replace chips, cookies, and sodas with fruits, veggies, trail mix, and milk. If you're confident your kids are eating healthy at home, you won't need to stress about the occasional treats they get elsewhere, says Amanda Rauf, PsyD, a psychologist who specializes in helping children with weight issues.

Prepare grab-and-go snacks. After your regular grocery shopping, spend a few minutes prepping snacks. Portion out nuts in baggies. Wash and cut up strawberries and put them in a bowl in the fridge. It makes healthy eating and portion control much easier. "It's a pain in the neck," Rauf says. "But you'll thank yourself for having all those snacks ready to go."

Cook more dinners at home. Start by planning to make just one more meal each week. Once that's part of your routine, make it two more. And get your kids to help. They may be more excited about healthy eating if they play a role in planning and making the meals, says Mollie Grow, MD, a pediatrician at Seattle Children's Hospital.

Get everyone on board, including adults. If you want your kids to eat healthier, you need to clean up your diet, too. That means no more secret stashes of junk food for the parents. If one parent resists, Rauf suggests they eat their treats outside the house. "Have your soda and cookies at work," she says. "But don't make it harder for everyone else [by having] those foods in the house."

Goal 2: Get Your Kids Engaged

Trying to impose healthy eating on kids can be a battle. So make your kids allies instead.

Grow something. You don't need farmland or a hoe. Start with just a pot of basil on your kitchen windowsill, Muth says. Kids get excited watching food grow, and it could help them be a little more adventurous with herbs and spices.

Enlist kids to check the ingredients. They can compare lists to find healthier products. "If the ingredients are really long and have a lot of words they can't pronounce, kids will learn that the food is heavily processed," Muth says. And Muth notes that the best foods, like fruits and vegetables, don't have an ingredients list.

Tune in to dinner. Make an effort to turn off the TV, put away your phones, and connect with each other during the meal. When you're eating as a family, you eat more slowly because you're talking. That allows you time to notice you're full before you overeat, Muth says.

Goal 3: Make Healthy Eating Feel Positive

Your kids need to see healthy eating as a good thing, so be thoughtful in how you talk about it.

Don't call it a diet. "I tell parents to discuss healthy eating as a way to fuel the body and feel good," Muth says. "That's much more effective than making it about losing weight or a number on the scale."

Treat everyone in the family equally. So what if one of your kids is a little heavy and his brother isn't? Treat them the same way, experts say. Don't allow the skinny kid to eat treats that his brother can't have. "Everyone in the family benefits from healthy eating, so everyone gets the same access to food," Muth says.

Go Slowly

When you're setting goals to change your family's eating habits, don't rush into it. "Start with the easiest change you can make," whatever it is, Rauf says. Maybe it's cutting out sugary drinks or making dinner together once a week. Once you've made that change, make another easy change.

"Then you'll build up momentum," she says. "And when you finally get to the hard changes, they may not feel so hard because you'll have the confidence that you can really make these changes stick."

SOURCES: Mollie Grow, MD, MPH, associate professor, Seattle Children's, University of Washington. Natalie Muth, MD, RD, spokesperson, American Academy of Pediatrics. Amanda Rauf, PsyD, psychologist, Boston Children's Hospital's Optimal Weight for Life Program.

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