

With over-weight kids the norm, parents are asking how much a toddler should eat

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Where does the American tendency to become overweight begin? With 20 percent of Montana high school students being overweight and 10 percent of those qualifying as obese, the question is as relevant in Montana as elsewhere.

While we can point the finger at sedentary pastimes and junk food, an educator with Montana State University Extension's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, suggests that we may need to become more aware of just how much food young children should eat.

"Often, we're over-feeding our kids," said Diann Pommer, who has been

with Extension EFNEP in Missoula County since 1989.

She added that by presenting appropriately sized portions for children, parents can help them feel positive about meals as well keep from wasting food and money.

Usually, EFNEP teaches adults about healthy eating and eating well on a budget. However, Pommer said that an outgrowth of those classes was that she began getting questions about how much kids should eat.

"We teach serving sizes for adults," Pommer said, "and we let kids come to our classes. So there were a lot of questions about serving sizes for children."

The answer to how much food children should have is, of course, dependent on their age, height and activity level. That said, there are some rules of thumb caregivers can start with.

"Try serving a tablespoon of vegetables per year of age, up to half a cup at about age five or six," Pommer said.

For a 2- or 3-year-old, try offering about four ounces of milk, one egg, one ounce of meat, or one-quarter cup of beans. For the same-aged child, offer one-half slice of bread or half a cup of cereal. Try part of a fruit rather than a whole fruit, for instance, segments of an orange rather than a whole orange or part of an apple.

"You can always give more, but if you offer small portions first, they might be full," she said.

So, if you have chili is for dinner, which includes protein and vegetables, you might want to offer a 2-3 year old one-half to three-quarters of a cup in a bowl.

"That's not going to look like much in a bowl," Pommer said, "So, use smaller bowls if you have them, and for other meals, use a salad plate rather than a full-sized dinner plate."

Buying a new plate or bowl for a child isn't necessary, she added. Parents can measure dry ingredients onto larger plates to "eyeball" what an appropriate quantity looks like. Half the food on the plate should be vegetables. Put a salad on the plate, and the plate will look fuller.

Pommer said that sometimes her clients begin by saying that fruits and vegetables are more expensive than they can afford, but she urges them to consider all forms of fruits and vegetables.

"Any form counts, whether fresh, dried, frozen or canned," Pommer said. "So buy on sale, in season and then either freeze or can the extra to serve at another time."

Another approach to getting children to eat healthy meals is to repeatedly offer them different foods, she said. Children develop favorite foods, but studies show that if parents offer a food multiple times, it is more likely that a child will accept it. Parents can also add vegetables into a child's favorite foods. For instance, grated carrots are a great addition to spaghetti sauce, and unsweetened apple sauce can be used in place of oil when making muffins.

"I think our role as parents is to keep providing a variety of foods to kids," Pommer said.

In general, the more processed the food, the less of it a parent might want to offer, or even have in the house. To replace the "convenience" of convenience foods, Pommer suggested making more than one meal's worth of soups or sauces and freezing them. Then all that's required for dinner is a bit of heating.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that, nationally, over the past three decades the childhood obesity rate has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2-5 years and adolescents aged 12-19 years, and more than tripled for children aged 6-11 years.

"We can do better than that if we combine healthy foods, appropriate portion sizes with increasing our physical activity," Pommer said.

Provided by Montana State University

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