

Nutrition experts offer tips on healthy summer eating for kids

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(Medical Xpress)—Summer time can often be a free-for-all when it comes to children and their eating habits, said one University of Alabama nutrition expert. There are, however, several things parents can do to help make meal times fun—and nutritious.

"With the rise of obesity across the nation, research has shown the importance of teaching [healthy eating habits](#) at an early age," said Sheena Gregg, a registered dietitian and assistant director of [health education](#) and nutrition services for UA's department of health promotion and wellness. "One way to do that is to involve children in the food-preparation process. If you can do that, then kids tend to take ownership and will get excited about the meal."

Often, parents will take their children to the grocery store and, while that is a great way to involve children, it might not serve the purpose that parents intend. At the eye level of most children, they will see items to include [sugary cereals](#), chips, candy, gum, and other low nutrient foods, said Dr. Rebecca Kelly, director of UA's Office of Employee Health Promotion and Wellness.

Rather than just have them tag along, Kelly suggested parents introduce their children to grocery stores and [farmers markets](#) with a game such as Bingo or a scavenger hunt. Give the children a list of things to find or ask questions about different items that they need to discover the answers while shopping. Children love games, and by doing that, they are engaged in the shopping process while also learning, Kelly said.

"What we as parents assume as a strategy to reach our children may not actually be the best strategy," she added. "The best strategy is to engage our children in conversation."

One challenge many parents face during the long, hot summer days is ensuring their children stay hydrated. It is often difficult to get children to drink plain water, but they might be more apt to try fruit-flavored water, Gregg said. Have children pick out different fruits, chop them up and put them in a pitcher of iced water and then wait for the fruity flavor to seep into the water.

Fruit kabobs, trail mixes and cereal mixes, pizzas on whole-wheat bagel slices, using cookie cutters to create sandwich shapes and trying different kinds of wraps are easy ways to add a bit of fun to snacks or lunches. When presenting new vegetables for children, always ensure there is dip available, whether it be hummus, peanut butter, salsa or even nonfat Greek yogurt with low-sodium taco seasoning. It doesn't have to be just Ranch, Gregg said.

Gregg also encouraged parents to not get discouraged if their child does not immediately like something. It usually takes at least seven attempts with a new fruit or vegetable before a child will enjoy it, so [parents](#) should try preparing it differently if they don't have luck the first time.

Children also like it when the fruits and vegetables are cut up for them. Gregg recommended packaging individual portion sizes to help them from overeating, as well as prepackaging for the week on Sunday, if possible.

If [children](#) are primarily at home during the summer, meals and snacks should be offered at a predictable time to help provide some structure and avoid the "free-for-all" eating mindset. If the child is hungry at a different time, one option would be to create a snack box that is filled

with his favorite vegetable sticks or fruits, Gregg said.

Things to avoid include food items with a lot of high-fructose corn syrup, as well as fried and greasy foods, she said.

"A great snack usually includes two different food groups, like an apple with peanut butter or a glass of milk with an apple," Gregg said. "Think like snack time is another opportunity to get the nutrients they need, to help fill in the food groups they've been missing that day."

Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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