Start healthy eating habits early to head off obesity in kids

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Photo: Agricultural Research Service

Provide a variety of nutritious options, model good eating behavior, experts suggest.

(HealthDay)—Though it may not always be easy, helping young children develop healthy eating habits is worth the effort, experts say.

Good nutrition is one of the best ways to prevent overweight and obesity, which affect a large number of American children. Obese children are at risk for diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma and sleep apnea, according to Kansas State University (KSU) researchers.

No parent wants their child to be sick, feel like an outsider in social situations, or be teased or bullied because of their weight, Tanda Kidd, an associate professor of human nutrition at KSU, said in a university news release.

Paula Peters, also an associate professor of human nutrition at KSU, pointed out that nearly one in four U.S. children aged 2 to 5 is overweight or obese. Therefore, she suggested, it's important to start teaching children to make [healthy food choices](#) at a young age.

"Give the child a wide variety of healthy food options and let [them] choose which and how much to eat," Peters said in the news release. "A child may start by eating nothing or eating too much," she added, but kids have a natural ability to know when they're hungry and when they're full.

Kidd said it is important to provide children with nutrient-rich, not calorie-dense, food choices. For example, give them fruits and vegetables for snacks instead of cookies, and give them 100 percent juice instead of soda.

Never use food as a reward for good behavior or other achievements, Kidd and Peters agreed. Instead, do things such as read a book together or play a child's favorite game.

Parents need to set an example when it comes to [healthy eating habits](#) so children can see them making good food choices. It's also important to monitor what children are eating when they're away from home, such as in day care, the experts said.

However, even if children are slightly overweight, they shouldn't be put on a diet, they added.

"That sets up the child for issues such as eating disorders later in life," Kidd said.

Better options include providing them with healthier [food choices](#) and boosting their [physical activity levels](#).

Other ways to promote healthy eating habits include cooking with children, getting them involved in grocery shopping and planting a garden, the experts said.

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics has more about child nutrition.

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