

Researchers suggest ways to develop healthy eating habits in a child

April 20 2015, by Jane P. Marshall



Helping a child learn to make good food choices is one of the best gifts a parent can bestow, according to nutrition professors at Kansas State University. Even on picnics, children get healthy snacks at Hoeflin Stone House on the Manhattan campus.

A healthy diet promotes success in life—better concentration and

alertness, better physical health that translates into good mental and emotional health.

But even the best intentioned parents can expect food fights with their children, said Tanda Kidd, associate professor of [human nutrition](#) and extension specialist at Kansas State University. Developing [good eating habits](#) in your children is worth the effort, she said.

Good eating habits also are a front-line defense against obesity, a scourge of the nation that happens when a [child](#) eats many more calories than he or she uses up.

Nearly 1 in 4 children ages 2 to 5 is overweight or obese, said Paula Peters. An obese child is at risk for developing diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma and sleep apnea. Peters is an associate professor of human nutrition and assistant extension director for family and consumer sciences at Kansas State University.

"No parent wants her child to be sick. No parent wants her child to feel like an outsider in social situations, or be teased or bullied because of her weight," Kidd said.

Peters and Kidd both conduct research in the area of childhood obesity prevention.

A primary key to teaching a child to make [healthy food choices](#), Peters said, is to start early.

"Give the child a wide variety of healthy food options and let her choose which and how much to eat. A child may start by eating nothing or eating too much, but she has an innate ability to know when she's hungry and when she's full."

A child learns about new foods at a time when she is exploring the world around her. And she learns to make decisions for herself.

Make the selection nutrient dense—not calorie dense. That means fruits and vegetables, not cookies for snacks. A glass of soda and a glass of 100 percent juice may have the same number of calories, but a juice is a healthier choice because it does not contain added sugars, said Kidd, a registered dietitian.

Soda and other sugar-sweetened drinks have empty calories, meaning they are "empty" of nutritional value.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, empty calories from foods high in added sugars, such as ice cream, cookies, candy, fruit drinks and some breakfast cereals and solid fats such as donuts, pastries, hot dogs, sausages, bacon and regular ground beef, contribute to 40 percent of daily calories for children and adolescents ages 2 to 18 years.

Kidd and Peters offer other suggestions:

- Do not use food as a reward for good behavior or other achievements. Kidd suggested other awards like reading a book together or playing a child's favorite game.
- Eat your veggies, Dad. A child learns food habits—what to eat, how much to eat, when to eat, where to eat—from parents.
- Eat with your children so they can see you making good [food choices](#).
- Be aware of what a child is eating away from home. Peters said that more than 25 percent of children ages 2 to 4 are in day care 20 to 40 hours a week. Check out meals and snacks offered to your child.
- Limit screen time—television—that encourages "mindless" eating.

- Avoid putting a child on a diet, even if he or she is slightly overweight. "That sets up the child for issues such as eating disorders later in life," Kidd said. Instead, offer healthier food options and increase physical activity.

Kidd and Peters also encourage parents to teach their [children](#) about [healthy food](#) choices in other ways:

- Planning and taking a trip to the grocery store gives a child ownership in food choices. Reading labels and comparing costs offer other lessons.
- Plant a garden. Peters said a child is more likely to eat vegetables he or she helped grow and harvest.
- Cook together. During special time with Mom or Dad in the kitchen the child will learn more than cooking skills.

Kidd and Peters are concerned about both food deserts and [food](#) swamps. The former defines area where fresh foods are hard to get, perhaps because grocery stores are far from the family home.

Food swamps describes areas that are so crowded with fast [food options](#) that making healthy eating choices is more challenging.

They also stress the vital role that physical activity plays in childhood health. Although there is no specific recommendation for kids ages 2-5 years old, parents should offer opportunities several times a day for active play. However, kids 6 and over are encouraged to be physically active at least 60 minutes each day, Kidd said.

"Parenting styles and family characteristics affect what a child eats, of course," Peters said. "So do community, demographic and societal characteristics such as school physical education programs, access to recreational facilities, school lunch programs and neighborhood safety.

"Weight gain is an indicator of an unhealthy society," she said. "We have to focus on ways to be healthier."

Week of the Young Children, sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children April 12-18, focuses on the foundation for a child's success in school and later life.

Provided by Kansas State University

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