

# Nutritionist shares tips for feeding kids while stuck at home

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Balancing finicky kid appetites with proper nutrition can be a challenge in the best of times. But now, with the majority of schools and day cares closed across Pennsylvania, many parents working from home, and

schedules thrown in disarray, it may seem downright impossible.

Kathleen Keller, associate professor of nutritional sciences at Penn State, can sympathize. As a child nutrition researcher and parent herself, Keller has some tips for keeping kids healthy and fed during stressful times.

## **Keep a consistent routine**

Even though schedules can be different or more hectic now than before the pandemic, Keller said it's still important for kids to feel a sense of structure and normalcy. Offering meals and snacks at consistent times each day is a great way to help your children adapt to new circumstances.

## **Balance screen time with physical activity**

Keller said that as we all spend more time indoors during stay-at-home orders, it's likely that kids may end up spending more time looking at screens. However, previous research has connected too much screen time with an increased risk for problems with inattention and impulsivity, obesity and insomnia.

"When possible, parents can balance time in front of the screen with time spent playing outside," Keller said. "When the weather is bad, encourage active play inside like having a dance party in the house, a pillow fight, or for quieter play, yoga and stretching."

## **Keep healthy snacks on hand**

Snacks are a vital part of movie nights or picnics in the backyard. Keller recommends offering snacks that are both yummy and familiar to children, like popcorn, apple slices, carrots, make-your-own trail mix,

non-sugary cereals, bananas, and grapes. It can be helpful to keep these foods in an easily accessible place so kids can get them when they are hungry.

## **Encourage body awareness**

Keller explained that as children grow and develop, they may lose their ability to know how much to eat at a meal or snack. Previous research from Keller and Penn State's Barbara Rolls found that when served larger portions of typical meals or snacks, preschoolers consumed more food, both by weight and calories.

But, Keller said that now is a great time to help kids tune into how their bodies are feeling and teach them to be more aware of feelings like hunger and fullness.

"This means eating a variety of foods when they are hungry and paying attention to how they feel when they've had a 'just right' amount," Keller said. "Teach children strategies to pay attention to the signs their bodies are giving them to guide their appetites."

## **Limit sugar-sweetened beverages**

Sugar-sweetened beverages like soda, [sports drinks](#) and some [fruit juices](#) taste good but can add calories to a child's diet without nutritional value. A [previous study by Penn State researchers](#) found that one in five children reported not drinking any water on a given day—and that those kids consumed more calories from sweetened beverages.

Keller recommends offering water and other non-sweetened drinks the majority of the time, and reserving sugary beverages as rare treats.

"With [warmer weather](#) on the horizon, children will be reaching for drinks to quench their thirst," Keller said. "Treat juices and other sugar-sweetened beverages as 'sweet treats' instead of beverages. Make sure to have flavored waters and other low-calorie, lightly sweetened beverages on hand and keep the juice boxes for special occasions."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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