

Kids and healthy eating can go together

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Photo: Agricultural Research Service

Initiatives from cooking classes to 'teaching gardens' can make it happen.

(HealthDay)—The notion that something is "easier said than done" could have been conceived for the task of getting kids to eat healthy foods.

But health experts warn that the consequences can be dire if kids don't learn to love fresh spinach, for instance, and instead stick with a diet stacked with processed foods.

More than 23 million American children are overweight or obese, according to government estimates, and many more children are at risk. Overweight kids face serious health problems that were unheard of in childhood just a generation ago, including [type 2 diabetes](#), [high blood pressure](#), heart disease and even stroke before they're adults.

The sooner that children start eating right, the better, according to Dr. Pooja Tandon, a pediatrician at Seattle Children's Hospital. "Healthy behaviors start from a very young age," she noted.

So what's a parent to do? Numerous public and private initiatives, from the local level to the federal government, have been sprouting up to give parents a hand in nurturing healthy eating.

Many experts believe that if children are more connected with their food—whether by growing it or

having a hand in meal preparation—they'll be more likely to choose healthy fare.

One of the biggest movements in teaching healthy eating to children has focused on getting young people involved in growing their own food. First Lady [Michelle Obama](#) has invited kids to help plant the White House kitchen garden, the U.S. [Agriculture Department](#) has a "People's Garden" program designed to help communities establish local gardens and the [American Heart Association's](#) "Teaching Garden" program has helped establish gardens in elementary schoolyards across the country as part of its efforts to fight [childhood obesity](#).

Efforts to pique children's interest in [healthier foods](#) and increase their access to them have extended to getting kids involved in food preparation, too.

Denise Hunter, president of the nonprofit FAME Assistance Corporation, launched the Let's Move California initiative in June, and one of its first activities was a series of cooking classes for parents and kids. "When you come into the class, you get a demonstration of how you make the food, and at the end of the class, you get a grocery bag full of the ingredients," Hunter said. "That means you can go home and put what you just learned into practice and immediately prepare a healthy meal for your family," she explained.

"What we really hope to create is a place where parents and children understand that they need to make healthy choices, and that becomes part of the family culture," she said. "Neither is dragging the other along. They're making healthy food and lifestyle choices together."

Some health advocates also believe that cooking classes, once a staple of middle school curriculums, should be brought back to all public schools. A study in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* found that a nutrition education program, called Cooking with Kids, not only improved kids' cooking and nutrition skills but

also incorporated geography, math, science and cultural lessons, and improved the youngsters' social skills through working together to prepare a meal and then enjoying it together.

Improving access to fruits and vegetables, a problem in some poorer neighborhoods, also has gotten some attention in the effort to improve kids' diets. Though farmer's markets have helped fill the void in some cities, their foods tend to be more expensive.

To counter this, and make locally grown foods more available to lower-income families, New York City has introduced a program that gives food stamp recipients a coupon called a Healthy Buck for every \$5 in food stamps spent at a farmer's market. Each Healthy Buck is worth another \$2 for food bought at a farmer's market.

Much of what kids eat, though, comes from foods available at their schools. Earlier this year, the U.S. government updated school nutrition standards, the first update in 15 years. The new standards call for offering fruits and vegetables every day, adding more whole-grain foods to the menu and serving only fat-free or low-fat milk. Schools also now need to limit the amount of saturated fat, trans fats and salt in foods.

However, Cornell University research released in July suggests that schools may need to remove "trigger" foods from their menus as well. When super-sweet foods, such as applesauce or fruit cocktail, were offered as options, children were more likely to eat more cookies, ice cream and snack cakes, the researchers found. But if bananas and green beans were offered instead, children tended to make healthier meal choices.

In addition, though government rules on school meals have changed, about half of elementary schools still offer unrestricted access to unhealthy fare, such as soda, salty snacks and sweets, according to a study in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*.

Some schools, though, are working hard to reduce access to junk food. A study in the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*

reported on one program that replaced food and beverage rewards in classrooms with small prizes. And, instead of bake sales and pizza parties, schools turned to healthy events like jog-a-thons as fund-raisers—and made more money in the process, the study found.

Students in participating schools also reduced the amount of junk food they consumed by 30 percent, according to the study.

Attempts to limit access to junk food has spread beyond home and school, however. The Disney Corporation, for instance, said in June that it would now require advertisers to meet strict nutritional standards to be allowed to advertise on its television channels, radio stations and websites. In addition, Disney said it was significantly reducing the amount of sodium in the children's meals at Disney's amusement parks.

Perhaps one of the most controversial steps aimed at improving the diets of children (and adults) came recently from Michael Bloomberg, the New York City mayor. He proposed a ban on most sugary drinks, such as soda and fruit drinks, larger than 16 ounces that are sold in the city. According to the proposal, "with every additional sugary beverage a child drinks daily, his/her odds of becoming obese increase by 60 percent." In September, a city panel voted to implement the ban.

More information: The U.S. government's "We Can" initiative has more on steps you can take at home to [eat right](#).

Read more about "teaching gardens" [here](#).

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