

Being a Healthy Eating Role Model

Parents are the most important influence in children's lives. Children watch and imitate adults, and look to them to learn proper behavior. Just as children pick up positive habits – saying please and thank you – they can also pick up attitudes about food.

As role models, parents need to monitor their own behavior so that their children acquire healthy attitudes toward eating.

Children learn by example

To get a sense of how your attitude might influence your children, examine your own behavior.

- Do you snack all day long?
- Do you eat in front of the TV?
- Do you eat whenever you are bored or under stress?
- Do you eat dessert at every meal?
- Do you skip breakfast?
- Do you have sodas rather than milk with your meals?
- Do you diet all the time and have a fear of food?

If you answered “yes” to more than a few of these questions, you are likely sending unhealthy messages to your child about food.

If you are eating poorly or skipping meals, your child is going to pick up on it. If you're anxious and unable to manage your own eating, you may pass that on to your child.

Establishing healthy habits can be very difficult for children who receive mixed messages. They won't perceive healthy eating as important if it is not something that they see you doing.

Positive and negative comments influence children's attitudes about foods. Remarks about guilt associated with eating certain foods or bemoaning the lack of time for meals will all be remembered by your child. What you do will make more of an impact than what you say.

Modeling healthy eating supports the development of healthy behaviors in children. And, there is no stronger message for the importance of healthy habits. For example, research shows that young girls are more likely to drink milk if their moms drink milk - milk contains calcium, an important nutrient for bone growth and development.

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Setting a good example

In order to model good eating habits, parents should eat and prepare food with their children on a regular basis. Family meals are the ideal opportunity to demonstrate healthy eating behaviors and to reinforce good habits. Pleasant memories of making meals and sharing them at home are the start of family traditions that your children will carry through life.

Studies also indicate that meals eaten at home are often more balanced and lower in empty calories.

Tips for parents

Actions speak louder than words, so it is unlikely that words will have much impact on your child's eating habits unless you practice what you preach.

Here are a few good habits to model for your children:

- Never skip meals - especially breakfast
- Take moderate portions
- Try new foods - but don't force your children to try them
- Turn the TV off while you are eating
- Limit junk food in the house
- Drink water and milk instead of soda
- Learn new strategies for managing stress that do not include eating
- Eat fruit for dessert
- Include vegetables and fruits with meals and snacks

While it is unrealistic to expect any parent to be a perfect role model, trying your best to demonstrate good eating habits will positively influence your child. "Do as I say and not as I do" simply does not work. Eating a variety of foods will teach your children healthy eating habits that they can follow for the rest of their lives. And it is likely to improve your health as well.

For additional tips on planning healthy meals and snacks for your family, visit Meals Matter: www.mealsmatter.org, our FREE menu planning website.