

Feeling Good About Eating: A Parent's Guide for Children with Disordered Eating

Do you often say . . .

yes no

- "I'm too fat, I need to go on a diet."
- "I had dessert last night and now I feel really guilty about eating something so fattening."
- "I ate too much at the party, so I won't eat all day tomorrow to make up for it."
- "I'm too busy to make dinner so you are on your own."
- "Sorry honey, I can't swim with you. I'm too fat to wear a bathing suit in public."
- "My child is chubby, so I'll serve mostly fat free and low-fat foods to my family so that my child will lose some weight."

Are you surprised at how many times you checked "yes"? Would your child give the same answers?

Like many parents, you may not realize the impact negative comments and attitudes about eating can have on your children. They reinforce what your children see daily in the media: messages that provide unrealistic expectations that being thin is healthy, easily achieved, and a way to achieve happiness, success and popularity.

Children as young as ages 7 or 8 have a fear of fat and worry about the shape of their bodies and how much they weigh. Up to 75 percent of girls ages 9 to 12 have dieted 2 to 5 times in a single year. Boys also have issues with food and their bodies.

As children approach puberty, they are often unhappy with their body shape and size. Girls compare themselves to their friends or famous stars and models they see on television and in magazines. Boys envy the muscular bodies of sports stars. How do kids ages 8-12 pursue an "ideal" body during these times of change and anxiety? Often, it's by developing potentially harmful eating habits.

Your child could be suffering from disordered eating problems if she or he: (check all that apply)

- has a fear of eating fat or being fat
- has restrictive or negative behaviors surrounding eating, such as dieting, skipping meals or refusing to eat foods from an entire food group
- is very unhappy with the size/shape of her/his body
- exercises to extreme, several hours a day

Left untreated, disordered eating can jeopardize bone strength, interrupt normal growth, delay the onset of puberty and cause other serious health problems. Talk to your child's doctor if you checked any of these boxes.



What is normal eating?

Normal eating simply means eating when you're hungry and stopping when you're full. Emphasize nutrient-rich foods like low-fat dairy, whole grain, fruits, vegetables and lean meats.

Try not to limit your child's food choices to mainly fat free or low-fat foods. Children need to eat some fat for proper brain development and the nutrients provided. Fat also makes foods taste good and helps satisfy the appetite.

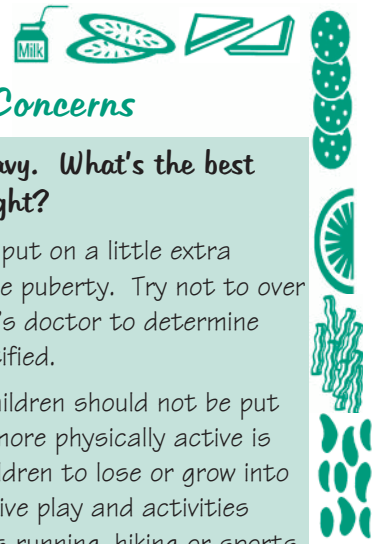
Calcium is an especially important nutrient for children as they approach adolescence. This is the beginning of a brief "window of opportunity" to build the densest, strongest bones possible to last their whole life. Dairy products are a good-tasting, convenient source of calcium.

What is a parent's responsibility?

You are responsible for setting regular family mealtimes and offering your child a variety of nutritious foods for meals and snacks. It's your child's responsibility to decide which foods he or she chooses to eat and how much. Don't pressure your child about what to eat or not to eat.

Focus on the positive aspects of food: good taste, pleasure, enjoyment and feeling good, instead of the fat, cholesterol and calorie content.





Special Concerns

8 Steps to Help Your Children Eat Better and Feel Better About Themselves!

As a caring parent, you are the best teacher your child has! Children mirror their parent's attitudes and behaviors. Here are some great ideas that will benefit your entire family. Check the things you'll try!

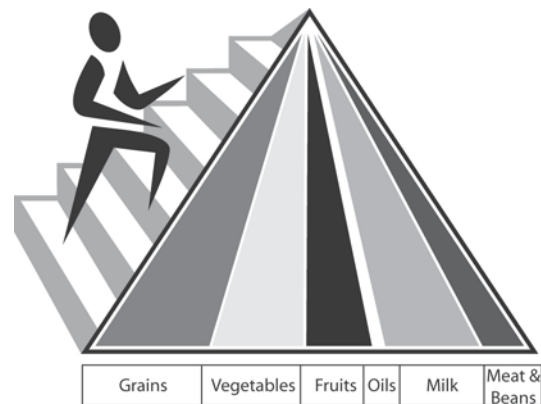
- **Make family meals a priority.** Schedule regular mealtimes and snacks. Encourage your children to help plan, shop for and prepare meals and snacks.
- **Make family mealtime an enjoyable, guilt-free experience.** Turn off the television to encourage conversation and expression of feelings. Don't discipline or criticize your children during meals and avoid arguments over food and behavior.
- **Eat breakfast with your kids.** It's your child's most important meal. Children who eat breakfast are more productive in school. The nutrients kids miss by skipping breakfast are not made up in other meals later in the day.
- **Set a good example.** Lead a healthy, active lifestyle. Eat foods from all the food groups and be physically active for at least 30 minutes a day most days of the week. Be active with your kids.
- **Encourage your children to be physically active.** Physical activity helps bones grow larger and more dense. Focus on the pleasure of movement and its health and energy benefits, rather than exercising for weight loss or to burn calories. Encourage them to participate in activities they excel in and enjoy.
- **Promote acceptance of all body shapes and sizes.** Discourage criticism and negative remarks about others. Avoid critical remarks about your own or your child's body.
- **Reassure your child that his or her body shape is just right.** Dispel the idea that a particular diet or "ideal" weight or body size is all it takes to be happy, popular and fulfilled.
- **Nurture your child's self-esteem.** Respect children as individuals. Recognize their creativity, intelligence, emotional maturity, athletic or musical abilities.

I think my child is too heavy. What's the best way for a child to lose weight?

It's normal for some kids to put on a little extra weight, especially right before puberty. Try not to over react. Check with your child's doctor to determine whether your concern is justified.

Generally speaking, young children should not be put on restrictive diets. Being more physically active is one of the best ways for children to lose or grow into their weight. Encourage active play and activities that move the body, such as running, hiking or sports. Limit the amount of time spent watching TV, sitting at the computer or playing video games.

Using USDA's MyPyramid as a tool, offer your child foods from all the food groups. Eating foods from the "Extras" list less frequently or in smaller amounts will help reduce fat and calories. Be sure to offer the same foods to other family members so that your child won't feel marked as being "different," or "on a diet".



MyPyramid.gov
STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOU

My child has declared herself a vegetarian and refuses to eat meat. What do I do?

Generally, lacto-ovo vegetarian diets that include milk products and eggs can satisfy the needs of a growing child. However, strict vegetarian diets require careful planning to ensure your child gets enough calcium, protein, iron, vitamin B₁₂ and energy. If your child wants to be a vegetarian due to a fear of fat in meat and dairy foods, set the record straight. Many lower fat options are available. Calcium and other nutrients in dairy products are critical for growth and strong bones, while meat is a major source of protein and iron for muscles, skin and hair.

