

Eating Well

Do you ever wonder if your child is eating well? Do you worry about how much your child eats? Do you find yourself fixing meals that are left untouched at the dinner table only to hear that all too familiar “I’m hungry” several hours later? Well, you are not alone! We have all had these thoughts and worries! Hopefully, I can help you worry less and enjoy mealtime more!

We all know that an increasing number of children are developing weight problems. While the causes are multifactorial (increasing availability of high-fat, high- sugar foods, fast food choices, pre-packaged pre-prepared items, less activity and more TV/video options, etc.), there are many things you can do as parents to help your child develop good mealtime habits!

Make mealtime a good experience! Your child can help with grocery shopping and preparing of the meal, can help set the table, fold the napkins, clear the dishes after the meal or anything else—like coloring special place markers for family members’ seats. Don’t make it a time for arguing, disciplining, watching TV, or lecturing. Make it a time for eating and sharing about the day’s events....have the atmosphere be relaxed and if possible “special” at least one night a week. Some ideas include dinner by candlelight, serving breakfast foods for dinner, or a “finger foods” only meal! A friend of mine has everyone write down a question, put the questions in a bowl, and then each family member pulls a question out, reads the question and answers it!

Don’t ever force a child to eat or insist they “clean their plate” when they aren’t hungry. This might reinforce poor eating habits later in life (eating when stressed which leads to obesity, becoming obsessive about food or extremely picky, etc). Rewards and punishments are not appropriate at the dinner table. If your child is not hungry, save the meal for later and when you hear that “I’m hungry”, bring the uneaten meal out. We all have likes and dislikes--be sensitive to your child’s palate, however, eating candy for dinner because it “tastes good” is not an option!

Offer a variety of bright food colors and textures appropriate for you child’s age, avoid really strong flavors and extremes of temperature. At times, my children crave certain foods and I am usually happy to include these in the meal (mac-n-cheese again?). However, it is exhausting and not appropriate for the adults to cook a different meal for the children than what they make for themselves at every meal. We do not routinely have dessert after every meal—only on special occasions. This keeps the temptation to “bribe” my children to eat with the promise of dessert out of our dinner conversations.

I have noticed as a pediatrician and a mom that my children tend to eat what they need. If they are going through a growing spurt, they eat more than if they are in maintenance mode. If I limit something, they tend to want that more. If I allow them to have that something and I don't make a big deal of it, they tend to lose interest. Parenting is an "art" that you will continually work on....know your child and then you can figure out your strategy to help them grow into great adults! Good luck at your next meal!