



## **Developing Healthy Habits and Healthy Kids Builds strong bodies and minds**

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Parents can help their children develop healthy habits by making healthy changes at home. Your home environment has the greatest effect on your children, and developing these healthy habits doesn't happen overnight. It requires time and effort involving the entire family. When the whole family participates, everyone shares the benefits.

So where do you start? First, be conscious of your own eating habits and physical activity. Research shows that children who see their parents eating healthy and being physically active are more willing to do the same. Your children will learn by example.

Next, set realistic goals for your family. You can begin with two or three such as taking a family walk three times a week, or change the milk you drink from whole to 1% low-fat. As your family becomes comfortable with these changes, you may continue to add more.

Eating meals together as a family is very important in the development of healthy habits. It allows you to be a healthy eating role model for your children and is a great way to introduce new foods to them. Keeping meals scheduled also helps to reduce snacking throughout the day. If a child does snack, be sure it is at least 1-1/2 hours before a meal. Two to three snacks per day is enough for most children. Encourage your children to eat fruits and vegetables like apple wedges, berries, or celery or carrot sticks at snack time, but don't be overly restrictive with food.

If your children want to satisfy their sweet tooth, some choices of lower fat snacks are animal crackers, vanilla wafers, graham crackers, ginger snaps, angel food cake and low-fat ice cream or frozen yogurt. However, remember to eat sugary foods in moderation. When reading food labels, find where sugar is listed. If it is listed in the first three to four ingredients, it may be considered high in sugar.

Like sugar, you should reduce your fat intake. You can do this by switching from whole milk to 1% low-fat milk as stated earlier in the article; buying ground beef or turkey that is 95% lean; or when buying cheese, read the label looking for information about the amount of fat grams per ounce. Your best bet is for 2 to 6 grams per ounce.

When time allows, plan your meals in advance. Your meals will be healthier, and you can be sure your children are eating nutritious foods. As you plan your meals, begin them with salad or fruit, which are lower in calories, then move on to the higher calorie foods like meat and pasta. You should also serve appropriate portions for each person. For more information about portion size, consult a registered dietitian for specific recommendations for you and your children.

It's also helpful to know that it takes 20 minutes for your brain to get the message that your body is getting food. Therefore, teach your child to eat slowly.

Make it a point to eat your meals at the dinner table and avoid eating in front of the television or computer. Dinner time is family time, and your undivided attention should be directed toward your family.

In addition to changing your eating habits, physical activity is very important. Playing outside is great exercise and helps to limit the amount of time used to watch television, play video games or use the computer. Other forms of physical activity include walking the dog, yard work and household chores.

When these changes become habit, feel free to reward your family with a fun physical activity such as mini golf, ice skating, bowling or hiking.

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