



CONSUMED



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YOU'RE NOT THE BOSS OF MY BODY! SUPPORT HEALTHY HABITS IN CHILDREN

By Michelle May, M.D.

We live in an abundant food environment; food is fast, convenient, often highly processed, and relatively inexpensive. As a result, many of our children are overfed but undernourished.

To protect our children from becoming victims of our current environment, we must make sure they have the tools to thrive while maintaining a healthy weight.

The good news is that children are born with the most important skill—the instinctive ability to know how much food their body needs. Instinctively, babies cry to let their parents know when they're hungry. Toddlers in perpetual motion eat only small amounts of food but manage to eat frequently enough to meet their needs. During periods of rapid growth or activity, they may be hungry all the time. When their calorie requirements decrease, they lose interest in food.

The bad news is that we can destroy their instinctive skills with our good intentions. If parents or other caregivers feed a baby to calm every cry, the baby may learn that eating can soothe any discomfort. When they're given food to keep them quiet or busy, they learn that they can distract and entertain themselves with food.

Once a child is old enough to sit at the table, well-intentioned parents will play games and praise the child to encourage them to eat. They may say "Good boy! You ate all your dinner!" This is a wonderful time for creating positive feelings about mealtime but it also teaches the child that eating makes mommy and daddy happy.

Parents sometimes coerce older children to eat everything they were served by saying "clean your plate or you don't get dessert." Children may decide that since their parents have to bribe them to eat it, the dinner must be the "yucky stuff" and sweets are the reward for eating more than they were hungry for. The result is a lifetime membership in the Clean Plate Club.

The bottom line is that although meeting the basic nutritional needs of your children is critical, it's important to provide meals and snacks in a way that respects their hunger and fullness cues and teaches them that while eating should be enjoyable, food is primarily for nourishment. If not, the stage is set for food and weight problems in the future.

Here are the keys to helping children thrive in our abundant food environment.

- Children are born with the ability to naturally regulate their food intake to meet their caloric needs. Pay attention when they say they are hungry or full.
- Don't force children to clean their plates or bribe them with dessert for finishing their meal.
- Never use food as a reward. Reward desired behavior with praise, extra attention, and privileges.
- Don't comfort your child with food. Use understanding words and hugs instead.
- Help your child develop interests and skills that increase their success and pleasure so they will be less likely to turn to food for fulfillment.

- Teach your children to cope with their emotions effectively so food won't serve that purpose for them.
- Don't impose stringent food rules since this may lead to rebellious eating when your children are out of your control.
- Avoid labeling some foods as "good" and others as "bad." Instead, teach your children how to balance eating for nourishment with eating for enjoyment.
- Involve children in shopping, meal planning, and preparation. This is a great opportunity to teach them about nutrition—and they're more likely to try new foods they picked.
- Sit down and eat together as a family. Mealtimes should be a pleasant time to reconnect with one another and model healthy eating and conversation.
- Help your child build a lifetime activity habit by reducing the amount of time your family spends in sedentary activities like TV and video games.
- Plan fun activities that provide everyone with exercise, enjoyment, and time together.
- Be a positive, encouraging role model for your family. When your children see you enjoying healthful foods and physical activity, they are more likely to do the same.

Prevention of food issues and the development of lifetime healthy eating and physical activity habits begins in childhood. It is never too late to learn these skills!

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