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## EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WEIGHT MANAGEMENT I CAN LEARN FROM A CHILD

By Michelle May, M.D.

I love watching kids at Halloween – and any time of the year for that matter. They can teach us so much about instinctive eating and effortless weight management. For example, during Halloween they are just as excited about the costumes, the trick-or-treating, the sorting, and the trading as they are about the eating. Don't get me wrong; they love the candy but food is only *part* of the experience. And for weeks afterward they get to enjoy a couple of pieces of candy each day—but most kids lose interest when their favorites are gone.



Children have many other natural behaviors that can teach adults how to love food –but not too much. Here are some of the important lessons I've learned from watching them:

**Eat when you're hungry.** From the time they're born, babies and young children know when and how much they need to eat—and they cry to let us know too. As they grow, this important instinct can be un-learned so by the time they're adults, they may have learned to eat for many other reasons besides hunger: mealtimes, tempting food, stress, anger, boredom, deprivation and countless other triggers. By recognizing the difference between *needing* to eat and *wanting* to eat, adults can re-learn when and how much to eat too.

**Stop eating when you're full.** An infant will turn their head away when they've had enough to eat, and a toddler will throw a plate of food on the floor when they're done. But as adults, we clean our plates because "there are starving children" somewhere or just because something tastes good. I'm not suggesting that we start throwing our plates on the floor again, but we need to remember that food is abundant in our society so there's no need to eat it all now.

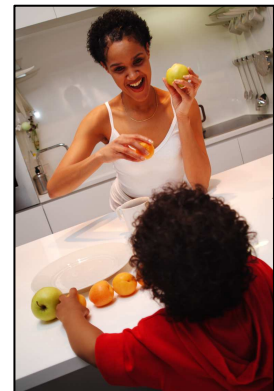
**Being hungry makes you grouchy.** Being hungry, tired, or frustrated are sure to make a child crabby—and affect adults the same way. As parents, we need to do our best to make sure we are prepared with nutritious, delicious food to feed our children when they're hungry. We should care for ourselves that way too.

**Snacks are good.** Kids naturally prefer to eat smaller meals with snacks in between whenever they get hungry. That pattern of eating keeps their energy up and their metabolism stoked all day. Adults who need to fire up their energy and metabolism might benefit from this pattern too.

**Play with your food.** Most kids love to examine, smell and touch their food. Since eating is a total sensory experience, they get the most from every morsel. This childlike approach of eating mindfully will allow you to appreciate the aroma, appearance and flavors more—especially if you aren't driving, watching T.V., or standing in front of the refrigerator. I think you'll eat less food while enjoying it more.

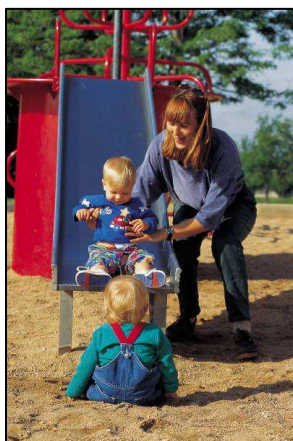
**All foods fit.** Though parents sometimes worry about sugar and junk food, “fun” foods are part of a healthy diet. In fact, overly restrictive food rules usually lead to rebellious eating anyway – just think about the last time you weren't “allowed” to eat something on a diet. Children and adults both eat healthier when they enjoy these less nutritious foods in moderation when they want them.

**You can learn to like new foods.** Healthy eating is an acquired taste; it can take up to ten tries of a new food before a child will incorporate it into their diet. Good nutrition is essential, so providing a variety of appealing, healthful foods will benefit the whole family. In our house, we had a two-bite rule when my kids were young. Assuming everyone at the table was hungry, they needed to taste two small bites of everything we served. If they still didn't like it, we didn't force or bribe them to eat it—but they did need to try it again the next time we had it. Since that was “The Rule,” there were no battles at the table and the kids often surprised themselves by liking something they thought they wouldn't. As teenagers they both enjoy a wide variety of foods.



**Be a picky eater.** The corollary to the lesson above is that kids won't easily eat something they don't like. As adults we sometimes eat cold French fries, stale cookies or salty chili just because it's there. Be a little pickier! Think of how much less food you'd eat if you didn't settle for food that tasted “so-so.”

**There is more to a party than cake and ice cream.** Invite a child to a party and they'll want to know what they're going to get to do. Invite an adult and they'll wonder what food will be served. You don't have to avoid parties to keep your weight down. Just focus on the real purpose of social events—to be social—and let food be the icing on the cake.



**Eating with your family is fun.** Since babies and toddlers must be fed by their caregivers, they naturally love eating with other people. Family mealtime is your opportunity to bond, connect with each other, and model healthy habits. Now that our kids are older, we sometimes play “High-Low” at dinner. Each member of the family takes a turn telling the others about the best and worst parts of their day. What a great conversation starter and opportunity for all of us to learn how we handle normal ups and downs in our lives.

**It's boring to just sit around.** Toddlers seem to be in perpetual motion as they constantly explore their world. Young kids love to run in the grass, play on the playground, and challenge themselves and each other with increasingly more difficult activities. Of course, as they get older, television, computers and electronic games compete for their

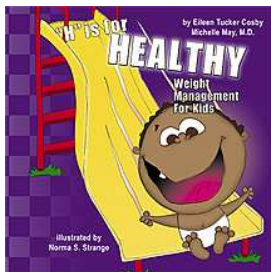
attention. To encourage other activities in our family, we use “screen time” which limits how much time our children are allowed to spend on anything with a screen. Sometimes adults would benefit by limiting their screen time and exploring their world a little more.

**Follow the leader.** Face it, kids watch, and often imitate, everything we do. If they observe us eating a variety of foods and enjoying physical activity, then they’ll learn to take good care of their bodies. Likewise, if they don’t hear us making comments like “I look so fat in this” or “I was bad at dinner so I have to spend an extra hour on the treadmill” then they are less likely to suffer from poor self-esteem and a negative attitude about exercise.

**Sleep is good.** After a full day, children need a good night’s sleep to prepare for all of the adventures that tomorrow will hold. Wouldn’t we all benefit from a consistent bedtime to make sure we get our rest too?

**Live in the moment.** Kids are masters at living in the present. They don’t waste a lot of energy worrying about what has already happened or what might happen tomorrow. They are fully engaged in small pursuits like discovering where the ants are going, chasing the dog, or seeing how deep they can dig with a plastic shovel. We, on the other hand, continue to scurry around, chasing after our dreams, all the while digging ourselves deeper and deeper. We could learn a lot from children!

**In Health, Enjoy!**  
**Michelle May, M.D.**



### Interested in learning more about feeding kids?

Check out my article, “Are You Teaching Your Child to be a ‘Good’ Eater” at <http://www.amihungry.com/good-eater.shtml> and my children’s book “**H** is for Healthy – **Weight Management for Kids** available in our online catalog at <http://www.amihungry.com/book.shtml>. I’ll be on a panel of experts discussing this issue on a special that will air on Discovery Health channel beginning in December so stay tuned.

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**Kick Start Contest in Phoenix:** Win a complete 8-week Am I Hungry?® Weight Management Workshop and 8 weeks of outdoor fitness sessions with Desert Foothills Boot Camp beginning Nov. 26<sup>th</sup> in Ahwatukee Foothills, Arizona. If you are interested in applying, email [info@amihungry.com](mailto:info@amihungry.com) to receive contest details. Hurry! Deadline is November 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Am I Hungry?® Workshops starting soon** in Annapolis, Maryland; Columbus, Ohio; Somerset, New Jersey; Phoenix, Arizona and other cities. Go to <http://amihungry.net> and look in the lower right-hand corner for "Find a Facilitator." Watch for more workshops in January!

**Am I Hungry?® Self-Paced Programs** - <http://www.amihungry.com/self-paced-programs.shtml>

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## GETTING THE WORD OUT

**Press Room:** Dr. May shares her non-diet, no-nonsense approach to weight management: [http://www.michellemaymd.com/press\\_room.shtml](http://www.michellemaymd.com/press_room.shtml).

**Michelle is available for speaking engagements, retreats, corporate programs and conferences.** Visit <http://www.michellemaymd.com/> to see speaking schedule, demo video and topics or send an email to [MMay@AmIHungry.com](mailto:MMay@AmIHungry.com).

**Blog:** Read her blog called "Consumed" <http://blogs.eastvalleytribune.com/view.php?blogId=43>.

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**PAY IT FORWARD!** If you've ever read anything in this Am I Hungry? E-newsletter that inspired or intrigued you, please pass it on! Your friends will get eye-opening content and a bonus copy of "101 Things to Do Besides Eat" to hang on their refrigerator when they order their own complimentary subscription at: <http://www.amihungry.com/enews.shtml>.