

Encouraging Our Children to Eat Healthy



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The U.S. childhood obesity rate is staggering, with all the associated risks for diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other health problems. Often we blame the victims. It is assumed that people who are obese just need to change their behavior – which they would if only they had the right information about food. But many studies have shown that information alone can't affect some of the factors that influence what we eat. For example, childhood obesity disproportionately hits people living in poverty, and hits them harder.

The food industry skillfully produces unhealthy, filling "foods" that cost much less than healthy kinds. Fresh produce is much more expensive, calorie for calorie, than junk food. Information can't change the fundamental inequality of access to healthy foods that is driving our obesity epidemic. A generation is at risk, and part of the cost will be a new spiral of health care expenses.

Nutrient labels only go so far. Science is still debating how much protein, fat and carbohydrates are needed, and what balance is healthy. Not all fats are bad and some are critical to health. For example, the fat in whole milk is needed in the first years of life for brain development. We share your concern about overemphasis on nutritional constituents and their potential for distorting healthy eating habits – ours and our children's. Many of us have been victimized by the flip-flopping fads of high-carb/low-fat and low-carb/high-fat diets.

Healthy eating isn't simply this much protein or that much fat. We need to research what kinds of protein and fat and carbohydrates, in what proportions, eaten at what times of day, in combination with what other foods, and perhaps even in what order. How do these factors interact for good health? We may even learn that physical activities and their timing – such as preparing food before eating it, or relaxing and chatting after meals – play a role in how our bodies make use of what we eat.

Here are a few things to rely on:

First, stick to what nature offers us, like more leafy vegetables than fatty animals.

Trust traditional ethnic diets. Refined over the generations, they generally produce healthier outcomes than the diets put together by the food industry in our time. Also, in many traditional cultures, eating takes place only at meals (rather than "grazing" throughout the day) and is a relaxed social event that makes less food and healthier food seem more satisfying.

Give up the sweet, fat and salty excesses of junk food. Be guided by your taste buds and your own sensations of hunger, fullness and satisfaction. Heeding these important signals helps us respond healthily.

We need to start children on this path from the very beginning of life

- See more at: <http://families.naeyc.org/families-today/encouraging-our-children-eat-healthy#sthash.x3qwinqp.dpuf>