

FitFuture

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Series on Fitness & Nutrition for Families

A Parent's Guide to Smarter Snacking

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Snacking is essential for children. As they grow and develop, their active bodies require lots of energy and nutrients. Their tiny stomachs prevent them from getting enough nutrition from only three daily meals. Eating small frequent feedings is the preferred method of intake for children. Snacking prevents overeating at mealtime, rounds out the diet by bridging nutrient gaps between meals, improves mood and motivation and positively impacts concentration and focus.

Make the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice

Cut up fruit and veggies into bite-sized pieces and package them in a way that makes it easy for kids to grab. Snacks that are easy to portion out into snack bags include fruit and veggie pieces, trail mix (a mixture of dry cereal and nuts, raisins, and a few chocolate chips), whole-wheat crackers with nut butter, energy bars or granola bars cut into bite-sized pieces and popcorn. A great tip for building your child's snack (and your own), is to always include a food from 2 different food groups: celery and peanut butter, hummus and pita, yogurt and berries, nuts and raisins, etc. This helps provide better balance to his or her overall dietary intake.

Snacks Go Beyond Sweet

When we hear the word "snack" we may think cookies, chips, or pie, but almost anything a child enjoys eating can be a snack if you shrink the portion size. Examples include: Whole-grain English muffin pizza (made with veggies and low-fat cheese), whole-wheat tortillas topped with mixed veggies and cheese, hummus on whole wheat pita bread, salsa & baked chips and even smaller portions of left-overs. Get kids away from the taste of sugar by incorporating these alternative snacks and flavors into their diet.

It's OK to Relax on Snacks

It is OK to be more relaxed with a few snack options during the week. Give children a little bit of what they enjoy a few days each week. Have you ever heard of the "90/10 Rule?" Provide healthy meals and snacks 90% of the time, and allow for higher fat or sugar snacks no more than 10% of the time. If your child eats 3 meals and 3 small snacks each day, this is equal to 42 "feedings" a week, and 10% is approximately 4 snacks weekly in which you can provide treats like ice cream, cookies, chips or chocolate etc. Concerning commercial snacks, it remains important to compare for total fat, saturated fat, trans fat and sugar, as well as desirable components like dietary fiber, vitamins and minerals.

Portions Should be Smaller

While it is fine to be more relaxed about snacks, it remains important to pay attention to the portion size. To control portions and help kids learn the value of doing so, keep snack-sized bags on hand, and allow your children to help prepare their own portion-controlled servings. Allowing your child to help choose and prepare snacks will help them develop their own good eating habits as they grow. Another strategy is to use their age as a portion guide – for example, your 6-year-old child can count out 6 peanuts, 6 chocolate chips and 6 raisins, etc. for his snack mix.

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