

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION: "HOW TO PROMOTE HEALTHY EATING HABITS IN YOUNG CHILDREN" WITH DR. KATE SPEIRS

INTRODUCTION

We often think about **what to feed children**, but **how we feed them** is also important so that we can help them develop healthy eating habits. There are many decisions to make concerning how children are fed: **where** do they eat, **when** do they eat, **who** eats with the children, **what else is going on** during mealtimes (is the TV on? Are there other things that might distract them from mealtime?), **how do we encourage** children to try healthy foods?

The choices adults make when feeding children and structuring mealtimes have been found to be linked with the foods that children **like to eat**, which foods **they actually eat**, and whether or not they are a **healthy weight**.

HELPING CHILDREN MAKE HEALTHY DECISIONS

As an adult we want to help children learn to make healthy choices about what to eat and to eat **in response** to their own **internal feelings** of **hunger** and **fullness**. We also want to **provide structure** and **talk** with children about **healthy eating**, but also allow them to have some **independence** and **be responsive to their needs**.

MEALTIME PRACTICES THAT WILL HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP HEALTH EATING HABITS:

- **Provide a routine around meal and snack times.** Set clear rules and limits about what, where, and when children can eat. Talk with children about these rules and limits so they know what is expected of them at meal and snack times. Make sure children understand the reasons for the rules and allow some room for negotiation.
- **Allow children to select from several healthy options** (e.g. we can have carrots or peas with dinner tonight, what would you like to eat?)
- **Use gentle reminders and encouragement to help children eat healthy foods.** (Do you want to try some more squash?)
- **Role model healthy eating for children.** For example, during mealtimes eat the same healthy foods as children and show them that you enjoy eating these healthy foods. Talk with children about why you like eating healthy foods and how you make decisions about what to eat and when to eat (focus on eating in response to hunger).
- **Have children help plan and prepare healthy meals and snacks in age appropriate ways.** Children are more likely to eat foods they helped prepare.

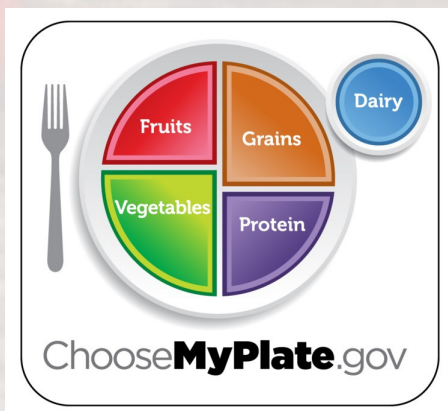
MEALTIME PRACTICES THAT WILL HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP HEALTH EATING HABITS CONTINUED:

- **Teach children about healthy foods and why it is important to eat them.**
- **Make sure that most of the food in environments where children spend time is healthy.** Make sure that healthy snack options (primarily fruits and vegetables) are available and unhealthy snack options are limited. If unhealthy foods are stored in environments where children spend time, put them out of sight and reach, and make healthier options readily available – i.e. put candy in a high cupboard and a fruit in a bowl on the kitchen table or a counter.

MEALTIME PRACTICES TO TRY AND AVOID:

- **Setting *strict limits* on what and when children can eat.** Some structure is necessary (e.g. set a mealtime), however, setting hard and fast rules (for example, saying absolutely no food after 7pm) that do not take children's needs into consideration should be avoided.
- **Pressuring (physically or verbally with threats or demands) children to eat.** Gently encouraging children to try something or eat a little bit more is useful, but avoid insisting or demanding that children eat a certain amount or certain foods (e.g. you have to finish your plate before you can leave the table). Be responsive to the children's needs. For example, if children tell you they are full, allow them to stop eating.
- **Threatening or bribing children with food.** This can include using a preferred food to bribe a child to eat a healthy and less preferred food (e.g. if you finish your broccoli, you can have ice cream for dessert) AND using a preferred food to bribe a child to behave in a certain way (e.g. if you behave in the grocery store you can have a cookie when you get home).

REFERENCES WHERE CAREGIVERS CAN LEARN MORE:



The MyPlate site (choosemyplate.gov) has a lot of great information about what to feed children and how to encourage healthy eating habits in children.

For Caregivers of Preschoolers Visit:

<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/health-and-nutrition-information>

For Caregivers of Older Children Visit:

<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/kids>