

Raising Healthy Eaters from Preschool to High School

Food, nutrition and eating skills are among the most important things you can share with children: food to fuel busy, successful lives; nutrition to nourish strong bodies and smart brains; and eating skills to enjoy the social aspect of meals with family and friends.

As with any part of raising children, no one does a perfect job with nutrition—not even nutrition professionals. As a parent, grandparent or adult caregiver, you can help to raise healthy eaters during these critical years by doing your best to:

- Serve regular, balanced meals and snacks with a variety of nutrient-rich foods
- Provide calm, pleasant meal times where adults and children can talk together
- Allow children to use their internal signals to decide how much and what to eat
- Explore a variety of flavors and foods from different cultures and cuisines
- Share an appreciation for healthful food, lovingly prepared and shared with others
- Make simple food safety, like **washing hands**, part of every eating occasion. Teach basic skills for making positive food choices away from home.
- Find credible food and nutrition resources when you don't know the answer.

While this may seem like an intimidating to-do list, two family habits go a long way to making all this happen: regular family meals and involving kids in nutrition from the ground up.

Make Family Meal Times a Priority

Sometimes a very simple act can have important, long-lasting benefits. According to parenting and health experts, that is exactly the case with family meal times. Eating and talking together helps:

- Foster family unity
- Prevent behavior problems at home and school
- Enhance academic success
- Improve nutrition
- Promote healthy weight for kids.

With that impressive list of benefits, it's worth making the time and effort to enjoy more family meal times each week. Look for easy ways to add just one family meal to the schedule. If evenings seem too hectic for family dinners, set aside time for a weekend breakfast or lunch. After a month or two of this new pattern, you can add another family meal each week. Before you know it, you will be eating together on most days.

Get Kids Involved in Nutrition

This one is fun for everyone and it can happen anywhere: your kitchen, the grocery store or a community garden. Every trip through the supermarket can be a nutrition lesson. Kids can learn to categorize food into groups: grains, fruits, vegetables, milk foods and meat/beans. They can choose new foods that they want to try, like picking out a new fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruit each trip. As children get older, they can help plan the menu at home and then pick out the foods to match the menu items while shopping.

Nutrition is just one of many reasons to have a garden. The process of planting, watching over and harvesting a garden provides daily opportunities for children to learn valuable lessons and enjoy physical activity, while reaping the fruits (and vegetables) of their labor.