Healthy Eating for Children Helping Your Child to Eat Well

Setting the stage for pleasant mealtimes

Make a point to eat as many meals together at home as possible. A regular mealtime gives you and your family a chance to talk and relax together. It also helps you and your child to have a positive relationship with food.

- Think of the family meal table as a conflict-free zone where you each come for positive time together. Save problem solving and difficult discussions for a separate time and place.
- Save distractions, such as reading, toys, television watching, or answering the phone, for another time and place.
- Teach and model good table manners and respectful behavior.

No more power struggles-learning to trust your child's choices during meals and snacks

Most children self-correct their undereating, overeating, and weight problems when the power struggle is taken out of their mealtimes. But the hardest part for most parents is stopping themselves from directing their children's choices ("Eat at least one bite of vegetable." "That's a lot of bread you're eating." "Clean your plate." "No seconds."). When you say things like this, you are taking over the child's job in the division of responsibility. Do your best to avoid commenting.

If your child skips over certain foods, eats lightly, or eats more than you'd like:

- Check yourself. Remember that your child has an internal hunger gauge that controls how much to eat. If you override those signals, your child won't be able to tune into that internal hunger gauge as easily.
- Let your child decide when he or she is full. You can remind children of the next scheduled meal or snack time by telling them, for example, "You can eat as much or as little as you want now. We will have our next snack at 4 o'clock."

Expect some rebellion as you change the way you feed your family. At first, your child may eat only one type of food, eat everything in sight, or stubbornly refuse to eat anything. Fortunately, no harm is done if your child chooses to eat too much or skips a meal once in a while. Although it can be tempting to give in to your child's demands, if you give consistent messages to your child about eating and mealtimes, your child will eventually become more comfortable with the division of responsibility.

Gradually, your child's eating habits will balance out. You'll notice that, as long as you provide nutritious choices, your child will eat a healthy variety and amount of food each week. Try to relax through this change in roles, and you'll see your child relax too.

Call your pediatrician if:

- Your child has a major change in appetite or weight. This could include eating too much or too little, or gaining or losing weight.
- Eating issues have turned your family's mealtimes into a battleground.
- · You suspect your child may have an eating disorder, such as anorexia or bulimia.

For more information about healthy eating visit the American Academy of Pediatrics website: www.aap.org

