



Why Are Children Not Eating Enough Fruits and Vegetables?

Fruit and vegetable intake among many children is low.¹⁻⁷ Studies show that only 20% of children ages 4 to 9 eat even half of the recommended amount of vegetables. This surprisingly low amount even includes french fries, which is one of the most commonly eaten "vegetables" in children 15 months and older.³ Fruit consumption among children 4 to 9 is almost as low, with only 30% eating at least half of the recommended quantity.¹ The US Department of Agriculture has increased the recommended daily intake of fruits and vegetables in the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and children are now advised to eat from four to eight ½ cup servings of fruits and vegetables daily, depending on their age and gender.⁸

Why are kids eating so few fruits and vegetables? Parental example has been found to be the strongest predictor of fruit and vegetable intake in children.^{5-7,9} When a child observes a parent enjoying fruits and vegetables, his acceptance of these nutritious foods increases. In addition, greater fruit and vegetable availability and accessibility in the home gives children more exposure to these foods.^{5, 6,9}

Some kids are characterized as food neophobics, tending to avoid unfamiliar foods.⁷ Though neophobics kids have been shown to have a low fruit and vegetable intake, there is growing evidence that repeated exposure can increase acceptance by children of foods they initially dislike. Studies testing exposure to disliked foods in school and home settings have found that repeated tasting on 10 to 15 occasions is usually enough to lead a child to accept a disliked food.¹⁰ This method of helping children overcome their reluctance to try unfamiliar foods is particularly useful because of its simplicity and effectiveness.⁵ Children generally concede to taking a bite or two of an unfamiliar or disliked food, as long as they're not expected to eat a full portion. Young children also tend to respond well to "tasting games," as long as they're done in a positive way.

Other studies have demonstrated that negative parental pressure or coercion can actually decrease a child's willingness to eat fruits and vegetables.^{5,9} Attempts to get children to eat everything on their plate or to pressure them to eat even though they say they aren't hungry can encourage them to lose their ability to recognize hunger.^{6,11} Bribes, threats, and food rewards used to increase fruit and vegetable intake in children can also be counterproductive.¹¹ Parents that eat less fruit and vegetables themselves are more likely to pressure their kids to eat more.^{5,6,9}

Some parents feel that children are not able to regulate the correct amount of food needed to be healthy. Research suggests the opposite. Children who are allowed to regulate the amount they eat from healthy food choices like fruits and vegetables seem to develop appropriate energy intake patterns by paying attention to internal

cues of hunger. Parents who put less emphasis on getting their kids to eat a certain amount and who focus more on exposing their kids to a variety of healthy foods will influence their child's food intake positively.¹¹ Children encouraged to try, rather than to "finish" their vegetables have a higher intake of vegetables and a better ability to know when it's a healthy time to stop eating.⁶

The Healthy Kids Meal Markers™ system is a great way to encourage children to eat fruits and vegetables. Kids want to fill their daily charts with photo markers, and the wide variety of choices encourages children to ask for unfamiliar foods. This positive, non-threatening approach relies on parental praise and encouragement—without emphasizing serving sizes and without any negative reinforcement. It's simple, and it works!

References:

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