"If You Don't Like It, Neither Do I"

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Most children do not know about, nor care about, "food value," "vitamins," "minerals," or "food groups," making it important for parents to provide guidance to their children to help them eat right. This publication will explore the ways in which parents influence children's eating habits and suggest some specific techniques parents can use to guide children as they learn about nutrition. How can parents help children to appreciate and enjoy foods that are good for them?

A social event

Food involves much more than nutrition, especially for a young child. The world of an infant centers around eating. Hunger brings about the first feelings of discomfort, while being fed represents the first true feelings of satisfaction. Children practice using their fingers and coordinating their hands and eyes by feeding themselves.

This social quality of eating continues throughout life. Children—and perhaps adults—are most likely to eat those things that look and taste good; that are offered when they are hungry; and that are offered in a relaxed, comfortable, social environment. Even in adulthood, some of our most pleasant experiences involve eating in the company of other people.

This social quality of nutrition affects the teaching of eating habits to children in several ways. First, since parents are important social figures in the lives of children, they have the power to influence children's eating habits in many ways. Being aware of that power is very helpful in the teaching process. Second, parents should realize that simply telling the child what they want him or her to know will not always result in changed behavior.

Finally, parents should consider the social surroundings when trying to improve the child's eating habits.

The parent factor
Studies have shown that children and parents tend to eat the same types of foods and have the same types of nutritional strengths and weaknesses. Further, it has been found that the mother's nutritional knowledge is related to the child's nutritional health.

What you see is what you get

One of the most obvious reasons for the similarities between parent and child nutrition is that parents buy most of the food consumed by the family and make the choices as to what will be available to the children. Many of the family meals are eaten together. If parents do not have sufficient background knowledge, the foods they purchase and serve may not provide children with nutritious choices at mealtime or for snacks. On the other hand, parents who do understand nutrition are likely to provide choices that are good for the child.

Johnny got home and headed straight for the refrigerator. He found raw eggs, pre-sweetened drink mix, leftover green beans, and shriveled apples. He decided on the drink mix and checked out the cookie jar.

Stevie came home from school and headed for his refrigerator, too. He found raisins, tangerines, milk, cheese, sliced celery and carrots, and hard-boiled eggs. He decided on raisins and milk.

Number one teacher

A second reason that children tend to eat the way their parents do is because parents are usually the child's first teachers of nutrition information. Methods for preparing and serving foods, what makes a complete menu, and what is a reasonable serving size are just a few pieces of information children pick up at home. Much of this knowledge will remain with them throughout life.

Two college students were making dinner together for some friends. They decided to serve broccoli with the meal. They worked together cutting up the fresh broccoli, and then as one turned to look for the steamer, the other dumped the broccoli into the pot and began covering it with water for boiling. Both students had planned to cook the broccoli the way their mothers always had without even thinking that there was another way to consider.

Value-able lessons

A third way that parents influence how their children eat is through the values they transmit to the child concerning food. These values help to determine how children will make food related decisions. Most of these values are not consciously taught to children, but children learn them just the same. Because they are looking for order and explanations in a world which is sometimes chaotic, some children tend to assume that all actions are guided by values, even when some actions are based on whim.

One little girl knew her parents did not drink alcohol because they were morally opposed to it. They also did not drink coffee or use black pepper. The little girl assumed the parents held a moral stance against coffee and pepper similar to their anti-alcohol position. She became concerned about what her parents would do when they received a decorative salt-and-pepper shaker set as a gift. It was then that the parents explained that they simply did not like pepper, and there was nothing wrong with using it.

Values related to food can include many things. Consider these examples:

* Cottage cheese is a disgusting food.

* Meat and potatoes make the meal; vegetables are extras.

* Sugar is bad for you.

* A good meal always includes a dessert.
* It helps to eat when you are depressed or upset.

* Fresh fruit is a good snack.

* The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

As a parent, you could teach your child that some foods are good and some are bad, that eating is something people need to do but is not fun, that eating is the greatest fulfillment any human being could experience, or that food can solve many problems.

Some values are explained to children, but more are learned by observation. Even before they understand many words, children can imitate the actions of their parents. Actions carry more power than words. While words are abstract and are merely heard, actions are concrete and can be experienced by all the senses. Parents' actions are guided by their values, although they are not always aware of them.

Confusion can arise when actions and words conflict with each other. For example, if you tell your child that he may not have any snacks because it is too close to mealtime, but you get yourself something to drink and nibble on as you prepare supper, your child may get confused. Becoming aware of your values about food and observing your own actions more closely may help to reduce the confusion.

**Eat your vegetables!**

Finally, parents influence their children's eating habits by molding their behavior through the use of a system of discipline. This relationship is not as straightforward as it sounds, however, because any discipline involves values which are taught both directly and indirectly. Examples may help to clarify this point.

*A mother wants her son to eat his green beans. She decides to offer him a reward. She tells him that he may have dessert if he eats his beans.*

**Direct teaching:** It is desirable behavior to eat green beans.

**Indirect teaching:** Dessert must be earned and is very valuable. People should always want dessert.

*A father and mother want their children to learn to eat a variety of foods. They set a rule that everyone at the table must try at least one bite of everything before getting a second helping of anything.*

**Direct teaching:** It is good to eat a variety of foods.

**Indirect teaching:** You do not have to like everything, but you have to try it.

**Indirect teaching:** You may not fill up on just one food.

Problems occur when the indirect teaching is not consistent with the parents' values or when the direct and indirect teaching conflict with each other, as when a person is rewarded with a hot fudge sundae for sticking to a diet. Awareness of the direct and indirect lessons can help to avoid these problems.

In summary, parents influence their children's eating habits by providing choices for them, by teaching them information about nutrition, by helping them form values, and through discipline techniques. Parents who want to change their children's eating behavior should consider using one or a combination of those approaches.

Here are some additional hints for making meals a pleasant time:

* Make meals a time for relaxed family interaction. Turn off the TV and radio and try to avoid topics of discussion that will lead to arguments.
* Plates are more likely to be cleaned off if small portions of food are offered each time.

* Avoid making too many rules for mealtime. Do not expect children to act more grown-up at the table than you do elsewhere. Let them be children, but encourage them to grow.

* Give your children attention when they are behaving well at the table so they do not need to misbehave in order to get your attention.

* Give everyone at the table a chance to share thoughts without being interrupted.

* Introduce only one new food at a time. Give children the freedom to not like it as you would an adult.

* Remember that all children and adults have times when they are not very hungry. A child will not starve from missing one meal.

* If adults demonstrate good eating habits, manners, and social skills at the table, children will have an easier time learning those habits as well.

**Activities to try**

* List three aspects of your child(ren)'s eating behavior which make you happy. (Examples: good appetite, does not overeat, has good table manners, likes milk.)

* List three things that you do to support the behaviors listed above. (Examples: praise them for eating vegetables, provide a good model, let them fill their own plates.)

* Go to your kitchen. If your children were to go to the kitchen right now and open the cupboard to get a snack, what would be their choices? (List them here.)

Are you satisfied with those choices? Yes ___ No ___ If you said yes, give yourself a pat on the back and go on to the next activity. If you said no, list some things you will add to your next grocery list to improve those choices.
Think about your main family meals during the past week (include the family in this activity).

* How many days did you eat that meal together as a family? _______________________________
* Did you have the TV or radio on during the meals? _______________________________
* Did you have any arguments among family members? _______________________________
* What else happened at mealtime? _________

Decide on one way you would like mealtimes to be different. Discuss this with the family. Your goal:

________________________________________________________

Make a plan with your family for reaching that goal. Decide who will do what and when you will sit down again to evaluate the plan.

Who needs to be involved? ________________

What will each person do? ________________

When will you evaluate? ________________

* Identify one aspect of your child's eating behavior that you would like to change. It could be a particular food which the child will not eat, some aspect of table manners, or snacking habits. Be specific, but do not start with the issue over which you have the biggest arguments. Start with something smaller and work up to the big issues.

Target behavior _______________________________________

Ask yourself the following questions:

Is it really necessary to change the behavior? What are the consequences if the behavior continues?
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Look closely at the situation. What rewards is the child getting for the behavior you want to change?
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How can you reduce those rewards?
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Extension Homemaker Clubs study topics including nutrition, management, housing, textiles and human development at monthly meetings. Local members receive training and present educational programs. Over 600,000 members nationwide benefit from this association with the Land Grant College in their state. For more information, contact your county Extension office.

References


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