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Kids Nutrition: Simple Changes, Big Rewards Inspiring Children to Eat Nutritiously is NOT Rocket Science

By Merilee Kern

A wise man – or woman – once said that “it’s the small things in life that matter.” This philosophy could not ring more true than when applied to the health and well-being of our nation’s children. There is no one thing that, no matter how consistently done, will assure good health. Rather, it’s the culmination of many single, relatively small behaviors that, altogether and over time, will help children foster a healthy body.

When asked what choices ‘my’ family makes relative to nutrition and fitness that keeps us all healthy and fit, a specific answer often varies, but it always simply conveys easy ways to make healthy options the norm in a family’s daily routine rather than the exception – and without the family feeling any sense of loss or deprivation.

With this in mind, here are a few sure-fire, yet simple, success strategies to help children eat more nutritiously:

- Don’t expect utter perfection of yourself as you work toward your family’s collective health goal. Do what you can to make healthy changes, as doing “something” is better than doing nothing. No time to make homemade oatmeal? Go for those instant bags instead! Any oatmeal is better than no oatmeal, and it’s certainly better than skipping breakfast or opting for any of those sugary cereals. You can’t get all the way there if you never get out of the starting gate!
- Don’t ask if your family wants a certain veggie or fruit with dinner. Make an executive [chef] decision and just serve it up! Knowing that such choices are not an option per se removes the possibility that your family may choose to eat a given healthy item or not. Praise the child who enthusiastically eats his or her healthy fare or at least tries it and does “well enough.” And, leverage your kid’s competitive spirit. Offer an eating challenge that he or she simply cannot resist, such as “I bet you can’t eat all of your peas in the next 10 minutes. You’ll be surprised how far this will take you.
- First and foremost, require that your child finish his or her healthy meal before any “treat” type foods are made available. Simply put, the child can NOT have that even occasional cupcake if (s)he has not eaten those veggies! End of story.
- We live in an age where food manufacturers are the most health-conscious in history. Take full advantage of these healthy alternatives. It’s simply not an option to choose those refined sugar-loaded gummy bears when dried fruit and trail mix snacks of every sort are a mere aisle or two away.
- Make fresh fruit an exciting dessert. Yes, dessert. Low-fat and low-calorie whipped cream with just a touch of colorful sprinkles atop sliced strawberries or other berries can make children squeal with delight. Rainbow Jell-O jam packed with citrus fruit is always a crowd pleaser. When it comes to nature’s dessert, get creative, build the anticipation in advance, and offer it up with as much excitement and reverence as you would a chocolate cake.
- Be willing to concede for the greater good. My son will only eat a healthy tuna fish sandwich with low-fat mayonnaise in a wheat pita if it has about four potato chips placed inside the pocket, too. I figure 2 or 3 potato chips is a fair concession to make for a wheat pita full of Omega-3 fatty acid-packed tuna. With kids, all or nothing doesn’t work – be willing to find that middle ground!!

Ensuring a child eats nutritiously is not about denial which, especially with the younger set, will surely prove self-defeating. Rather, it’s about strategy, systems, consistency and moderation to establish a balance of what is, and is not, health-promoting. It’s not rocket science...it just takes some forethought and some good old common sense.




Children’s health advocate, health industry veteran and two-time fitness champion, Merilee Kern, is the creator of the ground-breaking “Kids Making Healthy Choices” APP for children, parents/caregivers and educators (available on iTunes), which is based on her award-winning, illustrated fictional children’s book, “Making Healthy Choices – A Story to Inspire Fit, Weight-Wise Kids.” She may be reached online at: www.KidsMakingHealthyChoices.com.

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