



Out of the Mouths of Babes... Learning Healthy Habits From Our Children

Michelle May, M.D.
www.AmIHungry.com

MMay@AmIHungry.com or 480 704-7811

There are many important things that we need to teach children as they grow – but they have many natural behaviors that we shouldn't try to change. In fact, we could learn a few things from kids! Here are some important lessons:

Eat when you are hungry. From the time they are born, babies know when and how much they need to eat – and they cry to let us know too! As they grow, this important instinct can be un-learned. By the time they are adults, they may have learned to eat for many other reasons besides hunger – mealtimes, tempting food, stress, anger, boredom, and countless other triggers. By recognizing the difference between *needing* to eat and *wanting* to eat, adults can re-learn when and how much to eat too.

Stop eating when you are full. An infant will turn their head away when they have had enough to eat, and a toddler will throw a plate of food on the floor when they are done. But as adults, we clean our plates because “there are starving children” somewhere - or just because something tastes good. I am not suggesting that we start throwing our plates on the floor again, but we need to remember that food is abundant in our society so there is no need to eat it all now.

Being hungry makes you grouchy. Being hungry, tired, or frustrated are sure to make a child crabby – and they affect adults the same way!

Snacks are good. Kids naturally prefer to eat smaller meals with snacks in between whenever they get hungry. That pattern of eating keeps their metabolism stoked all day. Adults who need to fire up their metabolism should try this too.

Play with your food. Most kids love to examine, smell, and touch their food. Since eating is a total sensory experience, they get the most from every morsel. This childlike approach will help you eat less food while enjoying it more. You'll appreciate the aroma, appearance, and flavors more if you aren't driving, watching T.V., or standing in the kitchen!

All foods fit. Children are born with a natural preference for sweet and higher fat flavors. Though parents sometimes worry about it, these “fun” foods can be part of a healthy diet. In fact, overly restrictive food rules usually lead to

rebellious eating anyway – just think about the last time you weren't "allowed" to eat something on a diet! Children and adults both eat healthier when they learn to enjoy these less nutritious foods in moderation.

Be a picky eater. Kids won't easily eat something they don't like. Think of how much less food you would eat if you didn't settle for food that tasted "so-so."

You can learn to like new foods. Healthy eating is an acquired taste. Good nutrition is essential, so providing a variety of appealing, healthful foods will benefit the whole family. In our house, we have a two-bite rule. Everyone tastes two bites of everything; if they still don't like it, they don't have to eat it – but they have to try it again the next time we have it. Since that is "The Rule," there are no battles at the table and the kids often surprise themselves by liking something they thought they wouldn't.

Follow the leader. Face it, kids watch, and often imitate, everything we do. If they observe us eating a variety of healthful foods and exercising regularly, then they will learn to take good care of their bodies. Likewise, if they don't hear us making comments like "I am so fat" and "she looks fat" then they are less likely to suffer from poor self-esteem and a judgmental attitude.

There is more to a party than cake and ice cream! Invite a child to a party and they'll want to know what they are going to get to do. Invite an adult and they'll wonder what food will be served. You don't have to avoid parties to keep your weight down – just focus on the real purpose of social events – to be social!

Eating with your family is fun. Since babies and toddlers must be fed by their parents, they naturally love eating with other people. Family mealtime is your opportunity to model good habits and connect with each other. Now that our kids are older, we sometimes play "High-Low" at dinner. Each member of the family takes a turn telling the others about the best and worst parts of their day. What a door opener!

It's boring to just sit around! Toddlers seem to be in perpetual motion while they are constantly exploring their world. Young kids love to run in the grass, play on the playground, and challenge themselves and each other to increasingly more difficult activities. Of course, as they get older, television, computers, and electronic games compete for their attention. In our family, to encourage other activities, we use "screen time" which limits how much time our children are allowed to spend on anything with a screen. Sometimes adults would benefit by limiting their screen time and exploring their world a little more!

Sleep is good. After a full day, children need a good night's sleep to prepare for all of the adventures that tomorrow will hold. Wouldn't we all benefit from a consistent bedtime to make sure we get our rest too?

Live in the moment. Kids are masters at living in the present. They don't waste a lot of energy worrying about what has already happened or what might happen tomorrow. They are fully engaged in small pursuits like discovering where the ants are going, chasing the dog, or seeing how deep they can dig with a plastic shovel. We, on the other hand, continue to scurry around, chasing after our dreams, and all the while, digging ourselves deeper and deeper. We could learn a lot from children!

Michelle May, M.D., a Board Certified Family Physician, developed the Am I Hungry? Multidimensional Weight Management System (www.AmIHungry.com). She has served as president of the Arizona Academy of Family Physicians and has been active in the American Academy of Family Physicians, the Arizona Medical Association, and many other professional and community organizations. She writes and speaks widely on healthy approaches to weight management. Contact her at MMay@AmIHungry.com or 480 704-7811.