

## Help Your Child Become a “Good” Eater

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“My child just isn’t a good eater!” frustrated parents sometimes tell me during their son or daughter’s well child check-up. This means different things to different parents – perhaps their child is very picky, or eats only small amounts at a time. After I have examined the child, and we have looked at their growth chart to confirm that they are growing well, we discuss what being “a good eater” means. As a Family Physician who also deals with many adults who are overweight, I know that parents sometimes unwittingly set the stage for food and weight problems later in life.

Ironically, though there is more information available about nutrition than ever before, overweight and obesity in adults is epidemic in our society. The number of obese children and teens has doubled in the last 20 years, yet at the same time, we are seeing a frightening number of young women with serious eating disorders. Our society is plagued by convenient food on every corner, technology that has replaced playing outside, busy families rushing in multiple directions, and an over-emphasis on our outward physical appearance as a measure of our worth.

Our goal as parents is to raise healthy, happy children, so let’s look at how we can help them become “good” eaters – and carry those skills into adulthood too!

Remember, from the moment they are born, our children have the ability to know when they are hungry – and they cry to let *us* know too! Of course, they also cry to let us know they are wet, hurt, or bored, but we soon learn to tell the difference and try to meet each need appropriately. When we begin to feed them solid foods, they let us know when they have had enough by turning away from the spoon – or spitting the food back at us! As toddlers, they seem to be in perpetual motion, barely stopping long enough to eat a handful of fish crackers here, and a few slices of banana there.

Why is it then, that once children are old enough to sit at the table, their parents are often overheard bribing and threatening them to finish all their dinner? When we make our children clean the plate that *we* filled, we are teaching them to ignore their innate ability to know how much, and what, their bodies need. Instead, we should allow them to use *their* own hunger cues to determine how much they need, while *we* provide a balance of nutritious and “fun” foods. When we teach them about moderation and set a great example by living an active, healthy lifestyle, they will be less likely to develop weight problems later in life. Think of your slim friend who eats whatever she wants - but will turn down ice cream if she has had enough to eat!

“Eat all your dinner if you want dessert” translates to “you must overeat so I will reward you by letting you overeat some more!” By using sweets as a reward for good behavior or to bribe them into finishing the whole meal, kids begin to believe sweets are *really* special and they may want them even more. Instead, by making dessert just another (small) part of an enjoyable meal, kids learn to “save room for dessert” instead of becoming a member of the “clean plate club.”

Parents’ pressure to eat certain foods and certain portion sizes can cause the dinner table to become a battleground. At my house, we have a “Two Bite Rule” - everyone must try two bites of whatever we are having for dinner. This takes the pressure off of us as parents since it is “The Rule”. And surprisingly, by the second bite, our children often discover that most things taste pretty good – even if they are green! We don’t teach them that foods are “bad” or “good” – but we do teach them that making healthy food choices will help them reach their full potential.

In short, I believe it is *not* our job as parents to know how much food a child should eat at any given time, or to *make* them eat something because it is “good” for them. Instead, it is our responsibility to teach our children about healthy eating, to provide them with a variety of tasty, nutritious choices, to set a good example by our own eating habits, and most importantly, to make meals a pleasant time to bond as a family. That’s the best way to help your child *grow up* to be a “good” eater too!

For additional information, also see the Patient Educational Tool "Key Steps for Preventing and Treating Childhood Weight Problems" available at [www.AmIHungry.com](http://www.AmIHungry.com).

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