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Food and Fitness for a Healthy Child

Build character with family meals

Family meals let you share healthy foods and bond with your youngster. They also offer the chance to instill character traits like independence, politeness, and responsibility. Try these ideas.

Develop kitchen skills
Teaching your child basic cooking skills is a great way to boost his confidence and independence. Depending on his age, he could squeeze juice from a lemon, measure and mix ingredients, crack eggs, or follow a simple recipe. While the two of you work, talk about healthy cooking methods like steaming vegetables or baking chicken instead of frying it.

Eat politely
The family dinner table is the perfect place for your youngster to practice manners and graciousness. As you pass dishes around, model saying “Thank you” and “You’re welcome” so he will do the same. Also, talk about how to be polite if he’s not sure he likes something, perhaps by taking a small amount and trying a bite or two. Tip: Be sure to remind him to thank the cook.

Use teamwork to clean up
Your child can learn about cooperation and responsibility by pitching in after a meal. Give each person a job like carrying dirty dishes to the sink or wiping off the table and counters. You might also show your youngster how to put leftovers into containers, label with the contents and date, and store in the refrigerator or freezer.

Fun autumn outings
Get your youngster moving with active outings perfect for the season. Here are suggestions.

• Pumpkin farm. Your child could run through a corn maze or navigate an obstacle course at a local pumpkin patch. Let her pick the perfect pumpkin to take home—then carve it, and roast the seeds for a healthy snack.

• Fall festival. Look in the newspaper or online for events like a harvest festival with fun runs, relay races, or other activities for kids. If there’s live music, encourage your youngster to dance to the beat!
Looking for grocery “treasure”

The next time you go grocery shopping, bring your youngster along for a “treasure hunt” to find healthy foods. You’ll teach her to make good choices in every aisle.

**Produce section.** Ask your child to look for a fruit grown in your state. Or let her seek out vegetables of a particular color (say, orange or purple). Another idea is to search for an exotic fruit she’s never tried, perhaps jackfruit or guava.

**Dairy case.** Have your child name her favorite flavor of yogurt, perhaps blueberry or vanilla. Then, help her read nutrition labels to look for the one that’s labeled “nonfat” and has fewer than 10 grams of sugar and at least 5 grams of protein. Or she could search for cheese labeled “part skim” or “made with 2% milk.”

**Meat department.** Challenge your youngster to compare ground meats like beef, turkey, and chicken. She can put the one with the least fat and sodium into your cart. Also, have her look for cuts of steak or pork that include the word “round” or “loin”—explain that these are typically leaner.

**Q&A**

**Why whole grains?**

**Q:** I know whole grains are healthy. But how can I explain to my daughter why they’re good for her and get her to eat them?

**A:** Here’s a fun way to present this: Tell your child that a whole grain is like a superhero with a cape! Whole grains contain the entire grain kernel, while processing removes the nutrient-rich bran (the “cape,” or outer part) and germ from refined grains.

You can also explain that whole grains give her more energy to run faster and play with her friends. They help her think better at school, too.

To get your child used to eating more whole grains, try mixing brown and white rice or whole-wheat and regular pasta—half and half. Then gradually increase the whole grains. Once she gets used to the flavor, she probably won’t even miss refined grains.

**O U R  P U R P O S E**

**Fairy tale workouts**

**Your child can get exercise while acting out scenes from his favorite fairy tales. Share these activities.**

**The Gingerbread Man**

Have your youngster draw a gingerbread man on brown construction paper and cut it out. Then, one player hides it while the others run around to find it. The first person to spot the “cookie” gets to hide it next.

**Jack and the Beanstalk**

At the playground, let your child climb up a ladder or rock wall. He’s Jack climbing the beanstalk high into the sky to see what’s at the top!

**Hansel and Gretel**

Suggest that your youngster collect a dozen pebbles and pretend they’re bread crumbs. He can skip along a path, scattering them behind him one at a time. When he has dropped them all, he could skip back, bending down to pick them up.

**Not your average breakfast**

Take a break from scrambled eggs and cereal with these unusual breakfast recipes that you and your child can make together.

**Banana pops:** Cut a peeled banana in half. Let your youngster push a craft stick into each cut end. He can spread 1 tbsp. almond butter over each half, and roll them in 1–2 cup crushed granola.

**Shakshuka:** Add 2 cups marinara sauce and a pinch each of coriander and cumin to a frying pan. Simmer on medium-high heat until it comes to a boil. Crack 4 eggs into the sauce, each one in a separate spot. Cover, and cook 5–8 minutes on low heat. Serve with pita wedges.

**PB&J in a bowl:** In a blender, mix ½ cup nonfat milk, ½ cup frozen pineapple, ½ cup frozen mixed berries, and 2 tbsp. peanut butter. Pour into a bowl, and top with halved fresh strawberries or grapes.

**In the Kitchen**

**Q:** Why are whole grains healthy? I know they’re good for you, but how can I explain to my daughter why they’re good for her and get her to eat them?

**A:** Here’s a fun way to present this: Tell your child that a whole grain is like a superhero with a cape! Whole grains contain the entire grain kernel, while processing removes the nutrient-rich bran (the “cape,” or outer part) and germ from refined grains.

You can also explain that whole grains give her more energy to run faster and play with her friends. They help her think better at school, too.

To get your child used to eating more whole grains, try mixing brown and white rice or whole-wheat and regular pasta—half and half. Then gradually increase the whole grains. Once she gets used to the flavor, she probably won’t even miss refined grains.
A Dozen Ways to Eat Right

Healthy eating is a choice you can help your kids make every day with these simple tips. From eating a rainbow of fruits and vegetables to avoiding junk food, these 12 suggestions will have your children feeling better inside and out!

1. Start with breakfast

A healthy breakfast helps your teen’s body refuel in the morning—the meal literally breaks her fast from the night before. Kids often skip this meal because they’re short on time or they want to save calories. But let your child know that can lead to overeating later, and brainstorm ideas for healthy foods she can prepare quickly. The best choices are those that combine protein and complex carbohydrates to keep her feeling full until lunchtime (peanut butter on a whole-wheat English muffin or string cheese and an apple).

Tip: Suggest that she join friends for breakfast in the school cafeteria. She can find healthy choices there—and she’ll get to school on time.

2. Watch portion size

Meal and snack portions have grown through the years. For an easy way to control portions, consider downsizing your dishes. For instance, serve dinner on a salad plate, or use cups rather than soup bowls. Another idea is to “plate” meals rather than putting serving bowls on the dinner table. You could also post a portion-size chart on your refrigerator as an easy reference. Look for one that compares food portions to the sizes of items your tween or teen is familiar with, such as a computer mouse or baseball (try webmd.com/diet/printable/wallet-portion-control-size-guide).

3. Cut the salt

Many kids get much more salt than the recommended 1,500 mg a day. And having too much salt puts them at greater risk of gaining weight now and developing high blood pressure later. Encourage your child to cut down on salty snacks like chips, beef jerky, some drinks, and even pickles. Also, consider switching some brands of foods that you buy. For instance, the amount of sodium in pasta sauce can vary by as much as 100 mg or more per serving. Compare sodium levels when you’re food shopping, and encourage your youngster to do the same.

4. Eat in color

The same pigments that make carrots orange and spinach dark green also contain nutrients. Let your child know that just by “eating a rainbow” each week, he will get many of the vitamins and minerals his body needs. Suggest that he pick three colors of fruits and vegetables to eat each day. Then, he can look for those colors at the school salad bar or when he’s grabbing an after-school snack. Or he might put three bowls out (on the kitchen counter, in the refrigerator) and fill each one with different shades of produce. That will make it easy for him to find a colorful, nutritious snack.

5. Switch to whole grains

The name says it all—whole grains use the entire seed and contain all the nutritional punch that goes with it. Processed grains, like white rice or breads made with white flour, contain just part of the grain seed and not nearly as...
many nutrients. Along with essential vitamins and minerals, whole grains also contain fiber, which can help your tween feel full in fewer bites—and for longer. Switch to brown rice for meals and whole-grain bread for sandwiches. Tip: To ease the transition, you can mix the old and new (make a sandwich with one piece of whole-wheat and one piece of white bread, for instance).

6. Drink more water
Many teens drink soda every day, and that adds up to lots of extra calories and extra sugar. But even if your child only has soda occasionally, she could be gulping extra calories from sports drinks or juice. Remind her that water is the best way for her body to stay hydrated—and it has zero calories. Suggest that she fill reusable containers with water and put them in the refrigerator. Then, she can grab one when she’s heading to school, sports practices, or other activities. Make it easier for your youngster to “choose” water by serving it at meals and not having other drinks in the house.

7. Have dairy daily
A serving of cottage cheese, yogurt, milk, or cheese makes for a smart snack or meal since milk is full of bone-building nutrients like calcium and vitamin D. For the healthiest dairy choices, opt for fat-free or low-fat. Also, since flavored yogurt often has extra calories from added sugar, consider getting plain yogurt and having your teen blend in a sweetener like fresh fruit or a drizzle of honey. You can increase your child’s calcium intake by including it in everyday foods (make oatmeal with milk, blend yogurt into smoothies).

8. Take your time
Did you know it can take 20 minutes to feel full after eating? If your youngster is eating too quickly, he might miss his body’s cues that he’s full. Encourage him to slow down while he eats and take a break between bites. Extend meals, and keep everyone from eating too fast, by encouraging pleasant conversations. You might ask your child about his day or pose questions about what’s going on in the world so he has a chance to put down his fork and talk.

9. Choose lean protein
Your teen’s body uses protein for everything from building muscles to fighting infections. By choosing lean proteins like fish, chicken, turkey, or soy, she’ll avoid extra fat in meats like sausage or bacon. A hamburger or steak is okay once in a while, but for the most part she should stick with lower-fat options. Tip: Fish is one of the best lean proteins around. Canned tuna is a good option, as are salmon, halibut, and trout—all are high in heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

10. Keep a food diary
Having your youngster write down what he’s eating, and when, will give him a better idea of his eating habits. You might suggest that he record why he’s eating, too. Is he hungry? Is he tired, bored, or stressed? Encourage him to keep track for a week and then talk about what he finds. For instance, if he usually snacks on chips or candy while watching TV, maybe he could switch to fruit or limit his screen time. As he makes changes, encourage him to continue keeping his food diary. Writing down what he eats is a great way to stay accountable to himself.

11. Avoid junk food
Your child has probably heard that junk food is made up of empty calories and fat. But she might still reach for processed foods like fruit snacks or hot dogs because they’re quick and they taste good. Together, come up with a list of healthier choices (fresh fruit, turkey sandwich), and post it where your teen will see it when she’s looking for food—on the refrigerator or pantry door. Also, ask her to pick a spot in your cupboard for a “snack zone.” Then, work with her to fill it with nutritious options that she likes.

12. Read food labels
When you shop together or pull food items out of your pantry, take time to look at nutrition labels. Let your child know that he should be able to pronounce and recognize most ingredients listed. Too many difficult-to-pronounce ingredients usually means the food is less healthy. He should also notice which ingredients come first, since they are listed based on how much of each item is in the food. In other words, if sugar is the first ingredient listed, that food has more sugar than anything else—and he should look for something more nutritious!
Active Inside or Outside

Active play makes the best exercise since it keeps kids coming back for more! Encourage your children to stay active—whether outside or inside—with these fun activities and games. You don’t need fancy equipment or a gym membership, just a little creativity.

OUTDOORS

Adventure course

Together, create a course with “hazards.” Your child might line up pebbles as a “rock slide” to hop over and scatter hula hoops as “pools” to run around. Add a red towel for a “lava river” for him to cross by jumping over with both feet. Then, take turns completing the course, and time each person. Who can get through the fastest? Or make it a follow-the-leader game, and take turns being the leader.

Dress-up relay

Let your youngster gather two coats, two hats, two scarves, and two pairs of gloves. Put each set of clothing into a bag, and place the bags on separate chairs at one end of a yard. Have players divide into two lines and stand 15 yards away from a chair. The first person on each team races to the chair and puts on the coat, hat, scarf, and gloves. Then she races back and takes off the items. The next person puts them on, runs to the chair, removes them, puts them back in the bag, and runs back to tag the next player. Keep going until one team finishes—and wins.

Straddle ball

This game is good for a group. Stand in a circle, facing each other with feet wide apart and each foot touching the foot of the person next to you. One person rolls a playground ball, aiming to get it through another person’s legs before that player can stop it with his hands. Note: Players have to keep their hands on their knees unless a ball is rolled toward them. If the player stops it, he gets a point and rolls it again. If he doesn’t, he retrieves the ball and then rolls it (no point scored). The first one to get 10 points is the winner.

Flashlight hide-and-seek

Grab a flashlight for this fun nighttime game. Give the flashlight to one person (“It”), who has to find and tag the other players by shining the flashlight on them. Players get a 30-second head start to hide, and then It goes searching for them. The last one found becomes It for the next game. Variation: When It tags a player, she hands the flashlight over, and that person becomes It. Keep transferring the flashlight until everyone has been found.

Water balloon toss

Fill a few water balloons, and plan on getting wet! Form two-person teams, and give each team a towel to stretch between them (holding it by the corners). Have the teams stand a few feet apart and bounce a water balloon from one towel to another—without popping the balloon. With each toss, take a step away from each other. Play until the balloon pops, and then begin again with a new one.

continued
**INDOORS**

**Stuffed animal dance**
For this game, you’ll need one stuffed animal per player. Put the stuffed animals in a pile in the middle of the room. Name one person the “zookeeper.” Have her turn on music, and everyone else dances, jumps, and hops around to the beat. As they’re dancing, the zookeeper removes one stuffed animal from the pile and then stops the music. The players have to grab a stuffed animal from the pile, and the person who doesn’t get one is out. Keep playing, removing one stuffed animal on each round. The last one with an animal gets to be the next zookeeper.

**Workout tower**
Help your child cover 10–12 empty cereal, tissue, or other boxes with plain paper. On each box, he should write an exercise (“jumping jacks,” “sit-ups”). To play, take turns adding a box to build a tower. Each time, all the players do the exercise written on the box. The number of times they do it depends on the block’s position in the tower. For example, if a player adds the fifth box (“Bounce a ball”), each person bounces a ball five times. Then, they repeat the activities from the rest of the tower (four jumping jacks, three sit-ups, and so on). When the tower topples, start the fun again.

**Sock basketball**
You don’t need a hoop or even a basketball for this game—just socks and two laundry baskets! Make the socks into balls by folding one sock into another. Then, place the laundry baskets on opposite sides of a room, and divide the room in half by laying down a jump rope. Each player has one side of the room (if you have more players, form teams). The object of the game is to get the most sock balls into the opposing player’s basket. You can try to block the other player’s shots, but you can’t cross the line. When all the balls are tossed, count the ones in each basket. Whoever landed the most shots wins.

**Bug races**
Tap into your youngster’s imagination with this clever race. Use an open space in a basement, hallway, or family room. Decide on three “bugs” and their moves. For example, beetles could crawl on hands and knees, caterpillars might scoot on their tummies, and grasshoppers would crouch and jump forward. Race three times, with all players being the same bug. Which bug is the fastest? The silliest?

**Broom hockey**
This two-player game calls for two brooms, a small rubber or plastic ball, and two empty cartons. At opposite ends of a room, place the boxes on their sides (open end facing in)—they’ll be the goals. Give each player a broom, place the ball in the middle of the room, and start with a face-off. The players stand opposite each other, count to three, and use their brooms to try to control the ball. Then, each person tries to score points by getting the ball into her goal. After a goal is scored, begin again with a face-off. The first player to score five points wins.

*Editor’s Note: Nutrition Nuggets™ is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.*

**Nutrition Nuggets™**
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