



Breaking Your Gradeschooler's Unhealthy Food Habit

By Andrea Johnson, RD, CSP, LDN

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Just like any good investment, teaching your child healthy habits now will pay off in the long run.

🐦 Kids who nibble on nutrient-rich foods from a young age are more likely to maintain those good habits later in life. Research shows that children who become overweight are more susceptible to weight-related health issues as adults. Although it can be easy for families to slip into unhealthy food habits, with some practice, you can steer your child toward healthier choices.

Beyond Restriction

When you're trying to break an unhealthy food habit, forbidding certain foods that already are in the home may lead to behavioral problems such as tantrums and sneaking food. "When you tell children, 'you can't have that candy bar,' the first thing they will want is the candy bar," says Marina Chaparro, MPH, RDN, LD, CDE, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. "The more you restrict a certain food, the more tempting it will be for children. That is why food should not be labeled as 'good' or 'bad,' nor should it be restricted. Instead, limit the access of unhealthy food at home and when offering sweets do so in moderation." If you want to keep your favorite snacks around, don't munch in front of your child unless you're going to share. It's always better to work on making healthy changes as a family. Your child should know that you're all in this together.

Focus on Healthy Foods

Be sure to have plenty of healthful alternatives available to fill the spot of any foods you may have removed from the home. Wash and cut fresh fruits and vegetables into pieces ahead of time; then, place them within easy reach in the refrigerator. Gradeschoolers feel more independent when they have options, so try keeping a snack drawer of healthier items and let them choose a food from it every day. Keep the "sometimes" foods out of reach so that you can regulate when your child eats them. "If you want your kid to eat more fruit, offer it pre-sliced or cut in fun shapes," says Chaparro. "Research shows that the simple act of cutting fruit will increase children's consumption."

Learning to Like New Foods

A carrot is just not as exciting as a cookie — at first. But take heart, stick with the plan and celebrate small victories as you make gradual changes.

"Eating is a learned behavior," says Chaparro. "Just as kids learn how to ride a bike by falling numerous times, they learn how to eat by trying new foods at least 15 times. If they don't like it, no problem. Don't force it, but try again."

As you make a commitment to healthier eating, you'll reap some great benefits — both now and in the future. Setting up children for a lifelong habit of healthy eating will help them live a more productive and enjoyable life.

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