

Turning Kids on to Healthy Habits

**Dr. Tamara Lewis, MD,
Medical Director of Intermountain Healthcare's Community Health and Prevention
Program**

It's tough to be a kid these days. Every day children are bombarded with media messages. Television programs, video games, movies, magazines and even comic books present unrealistic ideas about body proportion and weight. Interspersed with media messages are commercials promoting food, high in fat, and sugar with few vitamins and minerals. Experts estimate that the average child sees about 40,000 commercials a year on television. And 80 percent of food ads children see are for candy, sugary cereals, or fast food.

It's no surprise that during the last two decades, the percentage of overweight children has doubled and the number of overweight adolescents has tripled. But there are solutions. Here are 10 tips to keep children healthy.

1) Promote good food choices

Keep kid-friendly foods like apples, carrot sticks, low-fat yogurt and cheese available for snacks. If candy, cookies, chips or other junk foods are readily available, don't be surprised when children eat them. Toddlers and school-aged children need three meals a day with two or three snacks. Avoid "grazing," where the child snacks on an ongoing basis throughout the day.

2) Educate kids about media influences

It's virtually impossible to shut out all media influences. Instead, teach kids to be smart media consumers. Help kids understand that advertising is designed to make them want something – whether they need it or not. Teach them to appreciate their own bodies and not compare themselves to others.

3) Limit fast-food

For many families, with working parents, limited time and tight budgets, fast food is a regular part of life. Limit fast food as much as possible. If you eat fast food, choose healthy options, like salads, fruit, and milk. And, go for the kid's meal, which has appropriate portion sizes.

4) Eat together as a family

Research shows children who eat meals with their families are less likely to use cigarettes, alcohol or drugs. They also do better in school. Family meals also help kids eat nutritious foods, like fruits, vegetables, lean meats, low fat dairy, and whole grains.

5) Parent's responsibility, children's choices

Parents are responsible for planning meals that are nutritionally well balanced. Children are responsible for choosing what parts and how much of the meal they will eat. Give children a variety of foods in each meal; including new choices and old favorites.

6) Limit screen time

Turn the television off during mealtime. In fact, limit “screen time” – the amount of time the child spends in front of a television, computer, video game or other screen – to no more than two hours a day. Computer time can be expanded if spent doing homework.

7) Say no to soda

Soft drinks, fruit drinks, and sports drinks, which today often come in 20-ounce servings, are laden with sugar. Avoid them. Have children drink milk and water with meals. Limit consumption of 100 percent fruit juices to six ounces a day.

8) Don't give up

Try not to use food as a bribe or reward. Food should be a source of nutrition and enjoyment, but not a motivator for certain behaviors. If a child says he or she doesn't like a certain type of food, don't give up. Children may have to be exposed to certain foods 20 or 30 times before they'll accept them. Offer the food matter-of-factly. Place the food on the table and let the child decide if they want to try it.

9) Stay active

Promote an active lifestyle for your entire family. Engage in activities that move your body every day. Make activities fun; bike, swim, dance, hike, or just play as a family.

10) Be a role model

If you eat well and are active every day your child will probably act in a similar way. Children of overweight parents are three times more likely to be overweight themselves. Remember that one of the strongest motivators for children is their parent's example.

Jason Mathis

Intermountain Healthcare Communications
Jason.Mathis@intermountainmail.org / 801-442-3104