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9 Lessons I've Learned About Feeding Kids

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A successful, balanced approach involves more than just making healthy food choices.

By Jill Castle

When I had my first child, I thought I knew everything there was to know about (<https://health.usnews.com/health-news/blogs/eat-run/articles/2016-09-01/5-mistakes-parents-make-when-feeding-their-kids>) feeding kids. I was a pediatric dietitian, had years of experience working in top-notch hospitals, and was confident in my knowledge. However, it turned out, I had a lot to learn.

With a slow-growing, selective eater as my first child, I found that feeding a child was challenging, and it required me to get creative. My background in pediatric nutrition was immensely helpful in nourishing my four kids, but the flexible approach I developed as a mom and a childhood nutritionist has been invaluable to my work with families.

My career has taught me that every child is a different eater, healthy food doesn't guarantee a healthy child, and nutrition guidance must be flexible for families to succeed in raising healthy children.

Here are nine lessons about feeding kids that I've learned over the years:

Simple menus get the job done.

Parents can cook up gourmet meals and have the "healthiest" food available at home, but some kids just won't eat. When kids come to the table and balk at a meal, it may mean that foods are too foreign or challenging for them. The solution: Simplify. While it's important to (<https://health.usnews.com/health-news/blogs/eat-run/2015/10/26/what-sensory-therapists-can-teach-us-about-feeding-picky-kids>) gently challenge children with a variety of new foods, be sure to include familiar, liked foods at the table so kids feel confident and comfortable with the meal. The path to palatable food for kids is keeping the menu simple and familiar.

[Read: (<https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2017-02-16/is-your-approach-to-feeding-your-kids-all-wrong>) Is Your Approach to Feeding Your Kids All Wrong?]

Food balance wins.

Getting kids to eat a balanced diet, one that showcases (<https://health.usnews.com/health-news/blogs/eat-run/articles/2017-05-23/9-plant-based-proteins-you-should-be-eating>) proteins, vegetables, fruit, (<https://health.usnews.com/health-news/blogs/eat-run/articles/2017-04-05/which-whole-grain-is-healthiest>) whole grains, healthy fats, dairy (or non-dairy substitutes), and some indulgent foods such as sweets and treats is the ultimate goal. Not only does a balanced, wholesome diet do a good job of covering the nutritional requirements for children and promoting their growth, it encourages their fullness and satisfaction after eating, which can (<https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2017-07-05/why-do-kids-eat-when-theyre-not-hungry>) reduce excess eating.

All foods can fit.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 16 percent of children's and teens' total caloric intake comes from added sugars. (Note that these are not naturally occurring sugars, such as those found in fruit and milk; rather they are from sugar added to foods.)

I believe there is room for sweets, treats and other indulgent foods in a child's diet. However, one must strike a healthy balance between wholesome, nutritious foods and indulgent foods. I teach the 90/10 rule, where 90 percent of foods eaten in a day are wholesome and nutritious and 10 percent are indulgent, such as sweets or fried foods. This balance allows kids to enjoy tasty, indulgent foods, but places the emphasis on healthy fare in their diet.

Don't let worry keep you from taking a balanced approach.

Parents worry about their children's eating, health and weight. Some are afraid their children's eating habits will cause (<https://health.usnews.com/health-care/for-better/articles/2017-08-17/childhood-obesity-not-just-your-childs-problem>) unhealthy weight gain, (<https://health.usnews.com/health-news/patient-advice/articles/2016-01-26/what-to-do-if-your-childs-weight-gain-falters>) poor growth or unsavory eating habits that will lead to problems later. While worry is normal, fear-based feeding is not, and can cause eating problems for children.

For example, a parent may be afraid that a child is gaining too much weight or eating too many sweets. As a result, the parent may react by tightly controlling food access and portion sizes, hoping this will help. However, the child may respond to this restrictive way of feeding by becoming overly focused on food, sneaking food that has been forbidden or overeating when he or she gains access to it.

[Read: (<https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2017-04-03/what-parents-need-to-know-about-extreme-picky-eating>) What Parents Need to Know About Extreme Picky Eating.]

No system or structure equals chaos.

When parents report their kids are constantly hungry and asking for more food, or they're in the pantry grabbing snacks and grazing all day, I know the food system and feeding structure in the home is off. Not only is this chaotic for parents and kids, this lack of routine may encourage a diet that favors unhealthy snacks and treats and overeating. Parents do well with feeding their kids when they focus on a balanced diet and have a regular daily schedule for meals and snacks.

(<https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2017-12-27/5-non-dieting-resolutions-families-can-keep>) Family meals are powerful.

Today's families are busy. Time to cook is tight, meals suffer, and as a result, the family meal takes a back seat. Yet, coming together as a family for a meal gives children an opportunity to connect with their parents, explore food, learn manners and develop a sense of routine and predictability. I believe family meals are a key ingredient to healthy development in children, from establishing a healthy relationship with food to learning what to eat and how much. Furthermore, (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4013176/>) research in teens indicates family meals are linked to healthier eating and weight, better academic performance and fewer risk-taking behaviors.

Keep kids guessing.

Variety is the spice of life. Eating the same foods day in and day out gets boring -- for kids and adults. So be sure to incorporate the element of surprise and make eating meals and snacks enjoyable. This will keep kids entertained, and it may entice them to try new food. Rotate through different after-school snacks each day or put a variety of nutritious foods on a platter at snack time. These are fun, creative ways to serve snacks, and they encourage a varied, healthy diet. Another idea: Add new foods to the menu regularly. Exposing children to new food is key in helping them learn about, taste and like a wide variety of food.

Get kids involved.

From (<https://health.usnews.com/health-news/blogs/eat-run/2015/10/02/8-ways-to-get-cooking-with-your-kids>) helping in the kitchen to sharing their input on the weekly menu or choosing between two food options, kids who are involved in making decisions about what they eat are more likely to be cooperative when food is served. When kids are allowed to help prepare food, they are more likely to eat it. When kids get to choose between this snack or that snack, they complain less and eat better. Kids like to have a say in food matters; it's part of their developmental process.

[See: (<https://health.usnews.com/wellness/family/slideshows/12-questions-you-should-ask-your-kids-at-dinner>) 12 Questions You Should Ask Your Kids at Dinner.]

Know *how* to feed your kids.

We place high regard on *what* kids eat. However, in focusing intently on food choices, parents may lose sight of how they feed their kids -- or that daily interaction around food with their children. For instance, place too much pressure on a child to eat or try a new food, and the child may refuse to eat, become pickier or even overeat. Research also shows that routinely offering dessert in exchange for a bite of vegetables may promote a child's preference for sweets and make vegetables seem less palatable over time.

So pay attention to more than what foods you serve, since how you feed your children has the power to undermine or reinforce healthy eating habits.

Jill Castle is a premier childhood nutrition and feeding expert who invites parents and professionals to think differently about feeding kids. Known as a paradigm shifter who blends current research, practical application and common sense, Jill serves on the Board of

Advisors for Parents magazine, is the author of "Eat Like a Champion" and "Fearless Feeding," hosts a podcast and writes a blog called "The Nourished Child," and is a sought-after speaker. Watch her TEDx talk, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFpHZQq0qDQ&t=13s>) The Nutrition Prescription for Healthier Kids, and learn more about Jill at (<http://www.jillcastle.com/>) JillCastle.com.

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