

THE 10

HEALTHY HABITS FOR KIDS

Nutritionist Cindy Williams shares her ideas for encouraging kids to eat well for life.



Cindy Williams has 20 years' experience as a nutritionist – and plenty as a mum, too!



It's easy to get caught up in simply getting a dinner on the table that everyone's willing to eat – never mind all the worries about nutrition! Issues like: am I feeding them too much? Should I make them finish their meal? Will they be hungry at school? Are they getting enough calcium, iron, or that latest vital nutrient I just read about? Is this food healthy? are all too often relegated to the bottom of the priority list when you've got after-school sports to get to, 'cool' birthday presents to purchase and questions about homework to answer.

But it pays to step back occasionally and look at the bigger picture. We all try to give our children healthy food so they grow up strong, fit and healthy. But the greater aim of parenting is to prepare kids for the big wide world by teaching them how to make good choices on their own. Instilling these healthy eating habits in your children will ensure they develop into healthy adults.

1 BE ADVENTUROUS

One of the best gifts you can give your kids is a sense of (culinary) adventure. Train their tastebuds to enjoy many different flavours, not just sugar, fat and salt. People who eat a wide variety of foods are more likely to get all the nutrients they need.


Remember, a child may have to try a food up to 10 times before they enjoy it. So don't give up on the first try. A good tactic is to tell your kids that when they try new foods, it's a sign that they're growing up. Praise them when they try new things.

Another great idea is to encourage them to try samples at the deli or supermarket – kids will try all sorts of foods, if they're fun and exciting. Take them grocery shopping and let them choose a new (healthy) food. Serve it with foods they already love and they may love the new food, too.

Don't shy away from giving them 'exotic' foods, either – I have seen 4-year-olds munching on all sorts of treats, including baby spinach leaves with sliced pear, blue cheese and quince paste! Most kids don't like 'bland' foods – they simply like what's familiar. If they can eat salty crisps, they can easily handle something like feta cheese!

2 EAT FIVE OR MORE COLOURS A DAY

All the vibrant colours in fruit and vegetables come from natural plant chemicals that have healthy effects on our bodies. Different colours have different effects, so it's good to eat a variety of different colours each day. If the only colour your child likes is 'tomato sauce red', then this may be the food habit to work on changing.

Growing herbs and vegetables at home is fun and teaches children where food comes from. If you have fruit trees, a vegetable garden or even a few pots of herbs, involve your children or grandchildren in planting, watering, weeding and most importantly, eating. A child may leave behind peas and carrots on the plate, or tell you they hate tomatoes, but chances are they will at least take a little bite if they have pulled the carrot from the ground, prised the peas from their pod or watched the tomato plant grow tall and produce fruit. It's amazing how much better they'll think food tastes if they have just plucked it from the earth. 





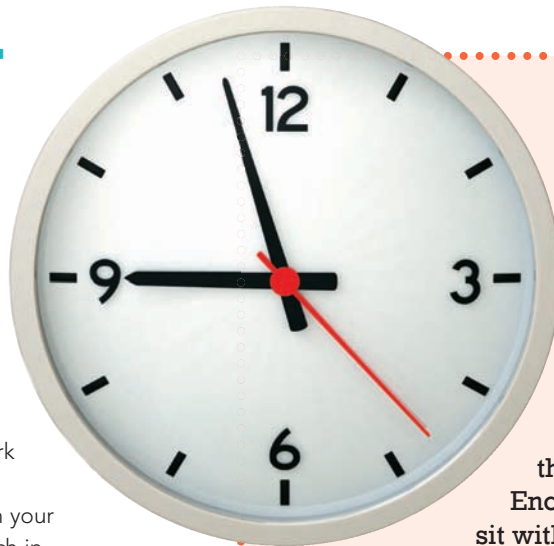
3 DRINK WATER

Buy your children a cool water bottle or two, and encourage them to take them wherever they go. Make water the drink of choice at meal times, and keep juice and other sweet drinks as 'sometimes' food, not 'everyday' food. While juice has valuable nutrients and gives a concentrated energy boost for active, growing children, all kids should go for water first when they are thirsty, not sugar-sweetened drinks.

Talk to them about how their body needs plenty of water to grow, play and learn. Demonstrate it to them by putting a sponge in some water and compare it to a dried-out sponge. When little bodies and brains are dehydrated, results like headaches, muscle cramps and feeling sluggish (and general crankiness) are common. Not good news when they're on the sports field or in class!

4 EAT BREAKFAST

If the healthy habit of eating a good breakfast in the morning isn't firmly established at a young age, it can slide into non-existence as they become young adults and move out on their own. Late night meals, stomachs recovering from a night out on the town, milk left on the bench overnight and the trade-off between more sleep and breakfast can make a double shot coffee on the way to work or university more attractive. Even if it's just a banana and a glass of milk, teach your children that some food in their stomach in the morning kick-starts the body, making it easier to be healthy, happy and full of lasting energy throughout the day.



6 EAT SLOWLY

As a nutritionist, I spend my professional life telling people to slow down and enjoy their food – then find myself telling the kids to 'hurry up and eat!' at home. Eating slowly is great for weight control, both now and in the future, and a fantastic way to show kids that it takes about 20 minutes for the message that they are full to get from their stomachs to their brains.

As much as we would love our children to finish their meal in minutes rather than hours, it's much more important that they learn to slow down and chew their food properly. Encourage them to savour their food – and make it a habit to sit with them while they eat dinner (preferably, eating dinner with them). Chatting to them while they eat makes dinner an enjoyable, social activity. Besides, it's difficult to talk with your mouth full, so kids will be encouraged to eat more slowly!

5 LISTEN TO YOUR TUMMY

"If you don't eat your dinner, you can't have any ice cream." Although children are born with the ability to stop eating when they are full, parents concerned about whether their kids have eaten the right foods – and enough of them – often override this natural regulating mechanism. However, letting them stop when they say they are full can mean whining requests for biscuits an hour later, or a 5am wake-up call for breakfast.

Teach children to listen to their tummies and ask themselves both quantity and quality questions: "Is my tummy full? Will I feel sick if I eat those extra biscuits?" The goal here is to make children aware of the many cues around them enticing them to eat, even if they are not hungry. Just because they are at the movies or passing the food hall at the shopping centre, do they really need to eat? Are they really hungry? Give them the opportunity to keep and develop their ability to sense 'fullness' by letting them determine when to stop eating.



BE A ROLE MODEL

Actions speak louder than words. It's not productive to teach kids how to be healthy, then not practise what you preach, so be consistent when teaching about healthy eating. Leading by example is often the most effective teaching method. So find delicious ways to serve up veggies, savour your food, practise portion control, share family meals... all the habits we've listed here, in fact!



7 ENJOY COOKING

Children are more likely to become discerning, adventurous eaters if they know how to cook. Give children their own aprons – it's half the fun of cooking – and let them help you regularly on small tasks in the kitchen. Buy a kids' cookbook for inspiration and, as they get older and become more confident, let them cook dinner once a week. If the thought of kids in the kitchen sounds like a recipe for disaster, enrol them in school holiday cooking classes. The box below outlines what cooking tasks kids are capable of at every age.

WHAT CAN KIDS COOK AT WHICH AGE?

Kids can begin to help in the kitchen at a very young age. Involving them from the beginning will help foster a lifelong interest in, and preparing, healthy food.

AGE	TASKS
0-1	Sit the baby where he or she can see you while you cook; talk to them about the food and show them what you are doing. While they may not understand, they are forming pictures of what is normal for parents to do in the kitchen.
1-3	Involve them as much as possible; give them plastic bowls, wooden spoons, plastic sets of cutters and play dough to use. As they get older and their motor skills become more refined, let them stand on a chair and pour pre-measured ingredients into a bowl. They can also help clear napkins and placemats from the dinner table.
3-5	Preschoolers can spread margarine, peanut butter or jam using a blunt knife. They can tear up lettuce for a salad, stir together ingredients, wash fruit and vegetables and help mash potatoes. They can also help set and clear the table.
5-10	Primary school-aged kids can use hand egg beaters, whisks and sifters. They can measure ingredients and mix them in the right order. Since their reading skills are improving, they can start to read recipes – this is a good time to buy a kids' cookbook. Close supervision of all food preparation will still be necessary.
10+	Kids have sufficient motor and coordination skills to start chopping, peeling, grating and using the stove. Supervision will still be necessary to start with, but this will lessen as they get older.

EATING TOGETHER IS GOOD FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH!

US researchers found that families who regularly sit down to meals together have children who tend to have higher self-esteem, interact better with their peers, show higher resilience in the face of adversity and know more about their family history. Research from Harvard University found that families who eat together are twice as likely to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day; consume less fried food and sugary drinks and have diets higher in a host of nutrients, including fibre, calcium, iron, folate and vitamins B6, B12, C and E.

8 SIT AT THE TABLE TO EAT

There's a time to play, a time to work, a time to rest and a time to eat. All too often the 'time to eat' gets lost in the shuffle. We eat dinner in front of the TV, we wolf down lunch at our desk at work and we grab snacks on the run. Train your children to focus on food when it's meal time. This means eating regular meals and sitting at the table – with no distractions. It not only reduces snacking (and the risk of choking as you run around with food in your mouth), it also teaches social skills, such as table manners, how to use cutlery and how to wait your turn to talk.



9 CHOOSE HEALTHY SNACKS

How many times have you seen a child stare into the fridge or pantry and tell you that there's 'nothing to eat' – despite it being full of food?

These days, most of us are so used to reaching for chips or some choccie biscuits when we feel like nibbling that they're all we see in the cupboard.

But these sorts of snacks tend to be low on nutrients and high in kilojoules. Instead, stock your house with healthier snacks like fruit, air-popped popcorn, unsalted nuts and yoghurt – and don't forget to show the kids what a portion should look like, so they know how much they should be eating.



10 BE ACTIVE

Regular exercise, whether it's organised sport or free play, is a vitally important habit to instill in your children. It keeps them fit, builds strong bones, tones muscles, burns energy and helps kids maintain a healthy weight.

Television, computers, video games, hours of homework and busy roads all conspire to keep our kids sitting, instead of playing. In our sedentary society, it's more important than ever to get your kids into the habit of moving. Here are some ideas: go cycling together, walk with them to school or the shops whenever possible, limit TV and computer time or take them skating, swimming, bushwalking or just head over to your local park for a play.

ONE MORE THING...

'Diet' really is a four-letter word! Never mention it to children. Even with overweight children, it's important that they're not 'put on a diet'. Instead, aim to maintain their weight and let their height catch up. [Hfg](#)

