

Surprising Truths About Healthy Eating for Children

Healthy eating isn't what we've been taught to think it is.

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Here's a secret pediatric dietitians know: The healthiest eaters aren't necessarily those who eat the most vegetables and least sugar—they're the ones who have a good set of eating skills, or what researchers refer to as eating competence. Building eating skills isn't just a more effective strategy for raising healthier eaters; it's an easier, more relaxed approach for parents, too.

Focusing on Eating Skills Instead of Eating Vegetables

As parents, we tend to think that raising a healthy eater means making sure they eat specific foods in specific amounts. We strive to make sure those [goals](#) are met from meal to meal and snack to snack by, say, insisting they eat a few extra forkfuls of broccoli and a limited number of cookies.

However, micromanaging our child's likes, dislikes, and portion sizes to meet certain [nutrition](#) goals can create wreak havoc on how competent they are when it comes to eating. And that's important because their eating competence is what keeps them healthy decades after any extra vitamins gotten from two more bites of greens are long gone. Alternatively, the ding put in a child's eating competence from a parent pressuring them with certain foods and limiting others can last them a lifetime.

Healthy Eating Skills Explained

Eating skills can be broken up into two distinct parts—those we intuitively know using sensations from within our body and those that we learn from experience over time. Figuring out how much or how little to eat, for example, is a body-led eating skill. It is not something a parent teaches their child; it's something most children know well from the time they are born.

[Cutting](#) our food using a knife and fork; enjoying unusual or new preparations, flavors, and textures of foods; not talking with your mouth full; and planning and preparing foods, on the other hand, are examples of eating skills we learn in time with a [caregiver's](#) support.

Benefits of Eating Competence

Children (and adults!) with a good set of eating skills—competent eaters, if you will—do better physically, emotionally, and socially. Research from the Ellyn Satter Institute, which both defined and created validated measures of eating competence, explains that people with a good set of eating skills do well in the four main areas of eating.¹

For one, they are in touch with their hunger and fullness, meaning they internally regulate their eating. They're also flexible about foods as opposed to being rigid in their likes and dislikes, have positive attitudes toward all foods (as opposed to being fearful and limiting), and prioritize their eating by planning and preparing food ahead of time. Again, some of these skills our children have innately, and some will be learned and developed over time.

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According to multiple studies, eating competence has been associated with a variety of benefits on well-being.² Competent eaters

- Have better overall nutritional intake
- Are more joyful and positive about eating
- Are more trusting and capable with themselves and other people
- Have more stable body weights
- Are more accepting of their body
- Are more active
- Sleep better and longer
- Have better medical profiles and lab tests
- In the case of parents, do better with feeding their children

4 Ways to Build Kids' Eating Skills

Here are some suggestions for how to help your child build a set of healthy eating skills:

1. Let kids determine portion sizes with their gut.

Competent, well-adjusted eaters don't measure their food or fret about going over or under the recommended portion sizes. Instead, they defer to signals from their body when it comes to figuring out how much or little they'd like to eat. Intuitive eating is a skill we are born with. As parents, it's our job to help our children stay in touch with this skill as opposed to overriding it with our own agenda. To help our children be good at internally regulating their food intake, we must believe them when they tell us they're hungry despite them having just eaten what we believe is enough. We must also listen when they say they're full as opposed to insisting they have one more bite.

2. Encourage kids to be flexible about foods.

Aside from issues such as a food allergy, good eaters don't rigidly avoid foods despite being hungry. They do their best with what is available. Expose your child to a wide variety of foods, preparation styles, and combinations in a positive environment without pressure and at least one option they are already comfortable eating. This can help them be more flexible and less rigid with their eating as they grow.

3. Discourage kids from food prejudices.

Having strong attitudes toward foods—believing some are super and some are junk, for example—can really interfere with a child's eating. When we [fear](#) foods—such as those high in sugar—we tend to limit and restrict them, which is linked with a host of negative repercussions such as bingeing, feelings of internal conflict and [guilt](#), and a loss of control around those same foods. To avoid problems, try rolling in some otherwise off-limits foods into snack time. This will help them learn to enjoy in a calm, relaxed way as opposed to wanting to overindulge, hide, sneak, or be overly focused on those foods.

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Also helpful: Avoid labeling foods as good and bad, healthy or unhealthy, as children are both more literal than adults and tend to be black-and-white thinkers (younger children especially). When we use polarizing language, it puts them at risk of internalizing negative feelings about foods. Feeling like you're a bad person because you enjoy eating donuts, for example, isn't a sign of a healthy, well-adjusted eater. In fact, it's much the opposite: the beginnings of [disordered eating](#).



Rethink making sugary treats off-limits for kids.
Source: Nathan Dumlao/via Unsplash

4. Model structure and making eating a priority.

Good eaters know eating is one of the most important things (if not *the* most important thing) they do from day to day. Thus, they make sure that they plan meals ahead of time either by preparing them or knowing exactly where and when they will be purchasing them such as at work or the school cafeteria. Developing a structure and routine for your child's eating—say, always having breakfast or dinner at the same time—will have a bigger impact on them than insisting they only eat the healthiest foods or the perfect portion sizes.