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Simple and sensible ways to improve your young child's eating habits

Obesity is a "growing" problem among children in the United States. Establishing good eating practices from the start - even before your child reaches 5 years of age - can help prevent excess weight gain and sets the stage for healthy eating later in life.

How much is too much?

Children's stomachs are about the size of their fist and grow in size with age, just as their fists grow. Think about this when deciding how much food to offer. Either let the child serve himself or start with a portion 1/3 to 1/2 of what you would eat.

Helping your child eat better foods

Most children go through "picky" phases. This is normal. Continue with your job of offering healthy foods and let them do their job of learning to like new foods.

Allow your child to explore new foods by looking, smelling, licking, and chewing the food, and sometimes even by spitting it out. One day he (or she) will finally decide the food is OK and swallow it! These actions are signs that he is interested in new foods. Discouraging him may make him less willing to try new things.

Serve new foods when your child is a little hungry.

Serve milk at meals and limit juice intake to 4 to 6 ounces a day (one juice box). Sodas, juice drinks, teas, and other sweetened fluids are best for "only once in a while."

Parenting to support your child's growth and development

Eating with your child is a time for quality interaction. Talk about growing, being strong and healthy, and how that connects with eating and physical activity.

Keep it brief: Meals should only be about 15 minutes. A child's attention span is short for everything - including meals.

Keep distractions to a minimum during eating.

For children, negative attention is better than no attention. Try to notice and praise positive behaviors (such as eating) and ignore the frustrating ones.

Make a routine for eating and follow it as many days as you can. Involve your child in eating preparations as often as possible. He just might enjoy it and may even offer to help clean up afterward!