

Healthy Eating & Diet

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Good Eats for School-Age Kids

How you feed your "big kid" now can inspire healthy eating habits for a lifetime.

By Elizabeth M. Ward, MS

Reviewed by Louise Chang, MD

WebMD Feature

New friends and activities change a school-age child's perspective on food. But it's still up to parents to provide him with the foods he or she needs to thrive.

Here's some expert advice on how you can do that, as well as set the stage for your child to learn [healthy eating](#) habits for life.

The Family Rules

Your child is probably spending more time than ever away from home, what with school, activities, and friends. Teachers, coaches, and peers may change a child's food preferences, but parents continue to be the most influential role models.

Many lifelong food habits are established between the ages of 6 and 12, says Tara Ostrowe, MS, RD, senior dietitian at the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center in New York. Parents should try to display the same behaviors of healthy eating and regular [exercise](#) they would like their child to have for life.

Leading by example is so important at this age, says Theresa Nicklas, DrPH, professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Rather than insisting your children finish their broccoli or drink their milk, show them you enjoy these foods. Be authoritative at the table, not authoritarian, Nicklas says.

Set the Table for Good Nutrition

Eating a variety of nutrient-rich foods — such as whole grains, low-fat dairy foods, lean protein, fruits, and vegetables — at meals and snacks provides the calories and nutrients a school-age child needs to learn and play.

How will you know your child's getting enough of the right foods? MyPyramid.gov, part of the government's food guidance system, can help.

MyPyramid's suggested servings are based on age, gender, and activity level. The examples below illustrate how school-age children's needs differ.

A 6-year-old, active girl every day needs:

- 5 ounces from grain group
- 2 cups from vegetable group
- 1 1/2 cups from fruit group
- 3 cups from milk group
- 5 ounces from meat and beans group
- 5 teaspoons oils.

An 11-year-old, active boy needs this every day:

- 7 ounces from grain group
- 3 cups from vegetable group
- 2 cups from fruit group
- 3 cups from milk group
- 6 ounces from meat and beans group
- 6 teaspoons oils.

Foster a Healthy Weight

Serve healthy foods in the suggested amounts, and your child will take it from there. Monitoring every morsel out of concern for a child's weight could encourage an eating disorder such as [anorexia](#) nervosa or bulimia later on.

Allowing kids to eat when they are hungry and stop when full is the key to lifelong [weight control](#). Using food to bribe, punish, or reward encourages a child to ignore hunger cues. Buy your children a book or small toy instead of an ice-cream cone when you want to show them you are pleased, says Ostrowe.

Foster a Healthy Weight continued...

Even better, take a walk or bike ride with your son or daughter. According to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, children need 60 minutes of daily physical activity. Many youngsters don't come close.

Television and computer games are partly to blame for kids' sedentary habits. Limiting screen time goes a long way toward good health. Studies show that children who watch less than two hours of television daily are more likely to be physically active and have a better diet than kids who watch more, Ostrowe tells WebMD.

Inadequate physical activity and excess calorie consumption, particularly from the high-fat and sugar-laden foods kids favor, add up to extra body fat that a school-aged child may never lose. A recent study in the British Medical Journal illustrates the importance of establishing habits that encourage a healthy weight at a young age. Researchers who tracked nearly 6,000 British adolescents for five years found that if a child was [overweight](#) by age 11, he was likely to be so at age 15, too. Many overweight teens go on to become overweight adults.

Build Strong Bones

Foods such as sweetened soft drinks, french fries, and candy are usually to blame for the extra calories that result in overweight. To make matters worse, these choices take the place of more nutritious foods.

For example, children who drink more soft drinks, such as soda and sports beverages, drink less milk, says Ostrowe. Excluding calcium-rich beverages such as milk leads to a shortfall in calcium at a time when your child needs more than ever.

By age 9, calcium needs increase to 1,300 milligrams a day. Calcium, along with vitamin D, helps promote fracture-resistant bones in adolescence and beyond. During the preteen and teen years, your child's body will form about 40% of the bone he or she has for life.

Drinking milk is the easiest way to build bone because it provides both calcium and vitamin D, says Christina Economos, PhD, assistant professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University.

Eight ounces of yogurt or 1 1/2 ounces of hard cheese each contain as much calcium as a glass of milk. (However, most yogurt and hard cheeses lack vitamin D.) Fortified orange juice and soy drinks are other worthy bone-building beverages.

Children who do not consume enough dairy or alternatives may need supplemental calcium and vitamin D. See your pediatrician or a registered dietitian if you're concerned.

Kids in the Kitchen

How do you get kids to buy into good nutrition? Getting children involved in food choice and preparation is one of the best strategies for helping them eat right, says Economos, herself a mother of two.

Kids in the Kitchen continued...

Giving kids a say in what they eat encourages the autonomy they crave.

Allow your child some veto power in the supermarket. For example, let your child choose between bananas and kiwis, or oatmeal and Cheerios. At home, encourage your children to prepare healthy brown-bag lunches and easy snacks.

Gather as often as possible for family meals, particularly when your child has been involved in making them. Research shows dining together without distractions -- including the TV -- translates into a better diet and lower chance of overeating, says Economos. Plus, it gives you and your child a chance to talk.

Of course, family meals are often easier said than done. Check out Healthy Meals for Busy Families for healthy meal preparation made easy.

Bet on Breakfast

Mornings can be chaotic, leaving breakfast -- and better nutrition -- in the lurch. Nicklas' research bears that out. Kids who eat breakfast take in more of the nutrients they need, she says. Breakfast skippers do not make up for the missed opportunity the morning meal provides.

What you eat for breakfast matters. Cereal (particularly whole-grain types) with milk and fruit make a quick meal that offers an array of nutrients.

Cereal can be good for the waistline, too. A recent *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* study that followed more than 2,300 girls from ages 9 and 10 found that girls who continued to eat cereal on a regular basis for 10 years were leaner than girls who did not eat it. Eating cereal was linked to increased intake of fiber, calcium, iron, folic acid, vitamin C, and zinc, and decreased consumption of cholesterol and fat.

Other Than Cereal

There's no need to limit breakfast foods to traditional choices such as cold cereal, however. The following healthy, kid-friendly breakfasts will beckon kids to the table (many are portable feasts to eat on the way to school or during morning snack time):

Half a whole grain bagel, spread with peanut butter and topped with raisins; milk

Leftover pizza; 100% orange juice

8 ounces low-fat fruited yogurt; whole grain toast; 100% juice

Fruit and yogurt smoothie; whole-grain toast

Scrambled egg stuffed into half a whole-grain pita pocket and topped with shredded cheddar cheese and salsa or ketchup; 100% juice

Waffle sandwich: two whole grain, toasted waffles spread with almond, peanut or soy nut butters; milk.

Snack Attack!

School-age children are notorious noshers. Not to worry, as long as between-meal snacking is nutritious. The best snacks offer significant nutrients for the calories they provide.

Hungry kids will eat what you have on hand, so stock the kitchen with the fixings for healthy snacks like these, many of which are great to take on the go:

Trail mix made from low-sugar cereal, dried fruit, chopped nuts, and mini chocolate chips

Sandwiches prepared with whole grain bread

Hummus or peanut butter and whole grain crackers

Fruit and yogurt smoothie

Bowl of whole grain cereal and low-fat milk

Vegetables and low-fat dip

Reduced-fat mozzarella cheese sticks and low-fat crackers

Low-fat microwave popcorn and 100% juice

Roasted soybeans

Yogurt

Low-fat cottage cheese and whole grain crackers


Nuts.

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