



Start early to teach healthy eating

As the parent of a preschooler, I wonder how much I should focus on the importance of eating healthy foods. I don't want to go overboard, but isn't it important to establish this concept early in life?

Helping children establish a healthy, balanced diet — one that will last a lifetime — does indeed require a balanced approach. When it comes to eating, you don't want to be too restrictive or, on the other end of the spectrum, too indulgent with your child. At the same time, it is beneficial to establish some basic rules and expectations with your child — and the sooner, the better.

A recent study indicates that doing so with children as young as 2 years old can lead to benefits down the road.

The study, reported at a conference in Boston in November, was conducted by pediatrics researchers at the University of Buffalo. Using data on nearly 9,000 children, the scientists looked at the ability of 2-year-old children to display self-control — that is, their parents reported fewer instances of irritability, fussiness and whimpering and a stronger ability to wait for something — as well as whether their parents set any rules regarding what the children ate. Then the researchers looked at data

two years later regarding the now-4-year-old children's consumption of soft drinks, fruit juice, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, fast food, salty snacks and sweets.

The researchers found that children who displayed the ability to self-regulate their behaviors at 2 years old ate more healthfully at 4 years old as long as their parents had also established rules around healthy eating. When parents didn't set boundaries about which types of food their children could or could not eat, the researchers found little difference in the children's diets.

Other things you can do that will help lead your child to adopt a healthy diet are to make sure healthy foods are readily available at home, and to be a role model by eating a healthy diet yourself. Along with setting rules and expectations about eating the right foods, these are the three key parenting practices that help kids establish healthy diets.

For more ideas on helping children up to 5 years old eat a healthy diet, Ohio State University Extension offers a 26-page ebook, "Smart Eating for Young Children." It's available to download as a PDF for \$4.99 at go.osu.edu/smarteat.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1043, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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