Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

How to help your child eat a healthy diet

Our toddler has a sweet tooth. Should we let him indulge, or is it time to start restricting snacks?

Guidance from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics says establishing healthy food habits early in life, along with a good dose of daily exercise, is key in helping children become healthy, active adults. So, yes. Just like the rest of us (adults), your toddler should be learning to eat small portions of sweets every once in a while, not all the time.

If you believe your child is already overweight, you should discuss your concerns with your son's doctor. The academy suggests letting children "grow into" their weight without a special calorie-restricting diet. Children's bodies are growing and developing, so you don't want to put them on a weight-loss diet. Too much calorie restriction could deprive them of the energy and nutrients they need to properly develop bone and tissue as they grow taller. And, putting too much focus on weight could cause body image issues.

Still, a recent study indicates that it may be especially beneficial to pay attention to food choices in young children who crave sweets.

The study, "Eating in the Absence of Hunger and Weight Gain in Low-income Toddlers," is being published in the May 2016 issue of Pediatrics. Researchers looked at young children, specifically 209 children at 21 months, 27 months and 33 months old. They focused on those from low-income families because they are at a higher risk of childhood obesity. The researchers found that the toddlers who ate more cookies after a filling meal and who became upset when the sweets were taken away had gradual increases in body fat over the course of the study. Interestingly, the children who chose a salty option (potato chips or cheese

photo: Wavebreak Media

puffs) instead of cookies did not experience the same weight gain. Still, the overall finding was that the tendency to eat when not hungry increased during toddlerhood, particularly with sweets, and this was associated with an increase in body fat.

So, it's good that you're paying attention. Noticing your child's sweet tooth and looking for ways to help shows that you are aware of the importance of establishing a healthy diet early in life. Here are some suggestions from the academy:

Being a good role model is important: Children easily pick up on their parents' habits. Be sure you're eating properly.

- Put the focus on health, and refrain from negative comments about weight.

- Become aware of the difference between eating when hungry and eating for other reasons — because of boredom, for example. Teach your child to pay attention to their inner cues and to choose food only when they're truly hungry, and to stop eating when they're satisfied.

- Don't use food to pacify or reward children. That can lead to a pattern of emotional eating.

- Make snacks healthful: Whole-grain cereal, graham crackers, fresh fruit slices and string cheese are among good choices.

For more good ideas, go online to see the academy's guidance for parents at eatright.org/resources/for-parents.

April 29, 2016

By Martha Filipic
614-292-9833
filipic.3@osu.edu