

Parents as Role Models for Healthy Living: Recommendations for Improving Your Child's Nutritional and Physical Activity Patterns

Have you ever said something around your child that you know you shouldn't have said, only to hear him or her repeat it a few minutes or hours later? Anyone who has spent time around children understands that they are very observant, even at a young age. Children watch carefully what others do, and more often than not, they imitate the behaviors of those closest to them. As a parent, most of the time that will be you!

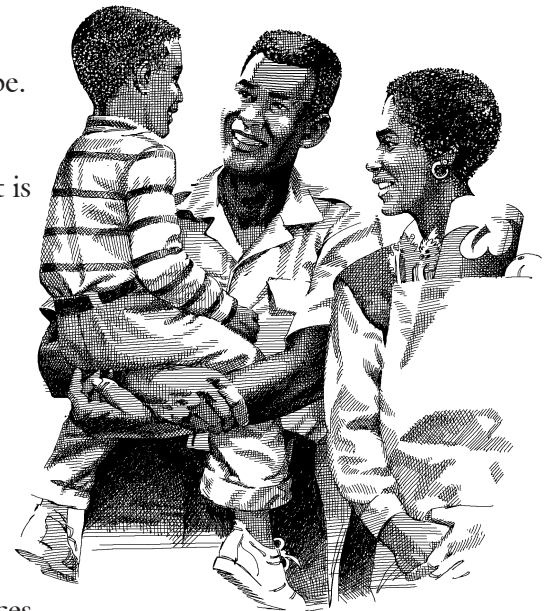
It is true that children are influenced by many different elements in their environment (e.g., peers, extended family members, child care providers, teachers, media); however, you serve as the primary influence in their lives. Your contributions to your

children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development are unparalleled, especially during the early years when their personalities and behavior patterns are taking shape.

Knowing that your children pay close attention to your actions, it is important that you set a good example for them. Researchers have discovered that this is especially true when it comes to your eating and exercise habits. Studies indicate that a child's eating and exercise habits are directly related to their parents (Golan, Weizman, Apter, & Fainaru, 1998). This means that if you model a lifestyle that involves healthy nutritional choices and regular physical activity, your children will likely do the same. Unfortunately, if you model for them a lifestyle that is characterized by unhealthy eating habits and very little exercise, they too will tend to adopt a similar lifestyle.

Being a positive role model for children in reference to proper eating and exercise should be a concern of every parent. Research has revealed that there are a number of potentially negative consequences that can result from children's unhealthy eating and exercise habits, with the primary one being childhood overweight.

Children who are overweight are at a greater risk for developing type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension,



breathing difficulties, and joint problems (Ritchie et al., 2001).

In addition to the physical health problems associated with being overweight, researchers have found that being overweight during childhood can also have a damaging impact on children's psychosocial and emotional development (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2001). A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota discovered that overweight adolescents were more likely to be teased, and as a result, were more likely to contemplate and



attempt suicide than adolescents who were not teased about their weight (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003). In this same study, teasing about body weight was consistently associated with low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with body size/shape, and high depressive symptoms.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to help you become a more positive role model for your children, and in turn, help prevent some of the harmful psychosocial and physical health problems that result from unhealthy eating and exercise habits.

Begin modeling healthy eating and exercise habits while

your children are YOUNG. The early years of a child's life are a critical time for developing certain kinds of knowledge and skills. Every aspect of development (e.g., physical, social, emotional, cognitive, moral) is influenced by the quality of care parents and caregivers provide for these young children. What happens during those early years can impact children for the rest of their lives. This includes eating and exercise habits. Researchers have discovered when excess pounds are put on during the toddler years, children are at a much greater risk for becoming overweight as adults. It is difficult to change behavioral patterns once they are established. Therefore, as a parent,

start modeling healthy lifestyle choices the day your children are born (if not before).

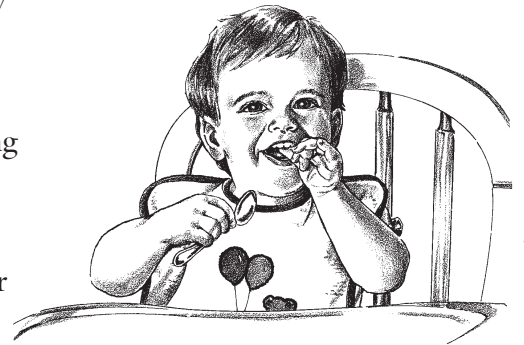
Think about what is best for you and your children's long-term health. What behaviors would you like for them to adopt as they grow older? Talk about these behaviors with your spouse, your child's caregiver, the child's grandparents, etc. Do your children see you eating a variety of fruits and vegetables? Do they see you eating nutritious snacks between meals? Do your children see you engaged in regular physical activities? Or, in contrast, do your children see you eating unhealthy meals and snacks,

oversized portions, and engaged in prolonged sedentary activities (e.g., excessive TV viewing)?

The USDA Food Guide Pyramids for adults and children (available at www.usda.gov/news/usdakids/food_pyr.html) are an excellent source for guiding the nutritional choices you make during mealtimes.

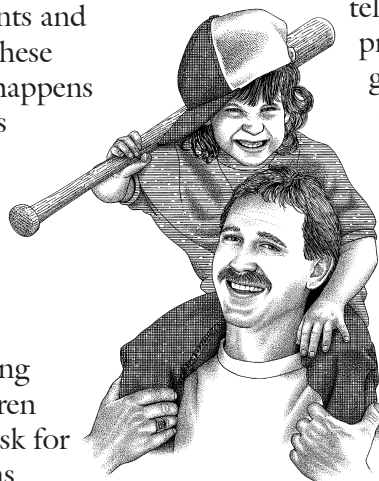
Talk to your children about the importance of a proper diet and regular exercise. Make it a habit to regularly eat meals together as a family—not in front of the television. Family meals provide parents with a great opportunity to discuss with their children the benefits of healthy eating and regular physical activity. Begin this practice when your children are very young. Use age-appropriate language and examples to illustrate why certain foods are beneficial to their health. For example, if your preschool-aged

child is served carrots at dinner-time, let him know that carrots help his eyes so that he can see the things around him more clearly. If your child drinks milk with her meal, tell her that milk helps build strong bones.

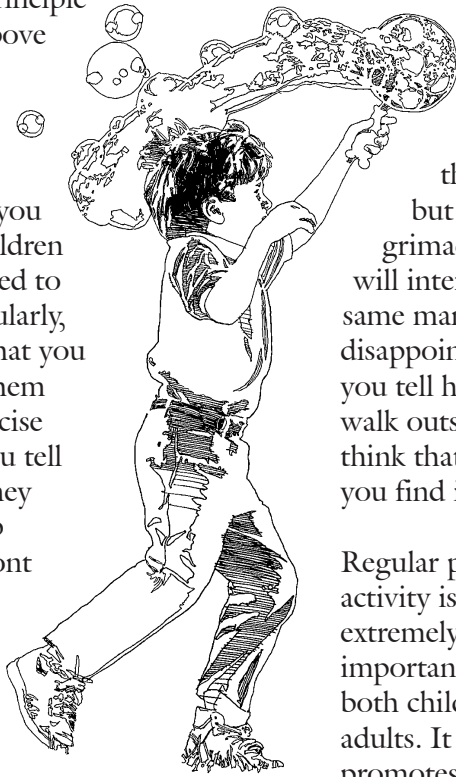


When engaged in physical activities such as walking, jumping, swimming, or running, let your children know that these activities help strengthen their muscles and bones and also help improve their balance and coordination. Talk about the positive short- and long-term health benefits of a proper diet and regular exercise, but then show your children that you are serious by putting your words into practice!

Avoid the “Do as I say, not as I do” mentality. Children are more inclined to pay attention to what you do rather than what you say, so back up your words with positive actions. Your children will likely pick up on any inconsistencies in your behavior. When you say one thing yet do the opposite, you establish a negative pattern that can be confusing to children. Don't be surprised if they follow your example! If you tell children that it's important for them to eat fruits and vegetables, make sure that you eat a variety of fruits and vegetables. If you tell children that they need to stop eating so many high-fat, high-sugar snacks, make sure that you cut back on these types of snacks also. If you don't want your children to eat french-fries with their fast-food meal, it's probably a good idea for you not to order them either.



The same principle discussed above also applies to your physical activity patterns. If you tell your children that they need to exercise regularly, make sure that you model for them healthy exercise habits. If you tell them that they need to stop sitting in front of the television so much, be careful not to watch too



much television yourself. Your children look to you as a guide, so set a good example for them, and they will likely follow your lead.

Model an enthusiastic attitude toward regular physical activity and healthy diet. Have you ever noticed yourself complaining about the need to exercise or the need to eat healthy foods? Parents who grumble and complain about physical activities will probably raise children who come to view exercise as a nuisance rather than an enjoyable part of life. Likewise, if parents complain in front of their children about not liking certain healthy foods (e.g., broccoli, peas, carrots, spinach), their children will probably avoid these types of foods without even giving them a try.

Parents communicate messages to their children in two primary ways (i.e., verbal and non-verbal). Be aware of the messages that you convey to your children with regard to healthy eating and exercise. Don't just focus on what you say but also on the non-verbal messages that you

convey through your facial expressions, tone of voice, and body movements. You may not come out directly and say that you don't like spinach, but if your child sees you grimace as you swallow a bite, he will interpret it that way. In the same manner, if your child detects disappointment in your voice when you tell her that it's time to take a walk outside, she will most likely think that walking is not something you find important or enjoyable.

Regular physical activity is extremely important for both children and adults. It promotes healthy bones and muscles, improves balance and coordination, builds self-esteem, and decreases the risk of developing serious health problems in later years. Experts recommend that all children and youth participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. However, it doesn't have to take place all in one block of time, and it doesn't have to be painful. Make exercise fun! Participate in physical activities that involve the entire family. Ride bikes together, take a walk, go bowling or swimming, or play fun children's games. There are endless ways to engage children in fun, creative, and physically active games and activities. Just use your imagination, and make it a positive experience for all!

Model the appropriate use of television, computers, and other forms of technology. Over the last several decades, children have

increased the amount of time they spend in sedentary activities, such as television viewing and playing video games. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such activities, they do take away from time that can be spent in physical activities. Researchers have consistently found a strong link between the amount of time children spend watching television and childhood overweight (Dennison, Erb, & Jenkins, 2002). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children

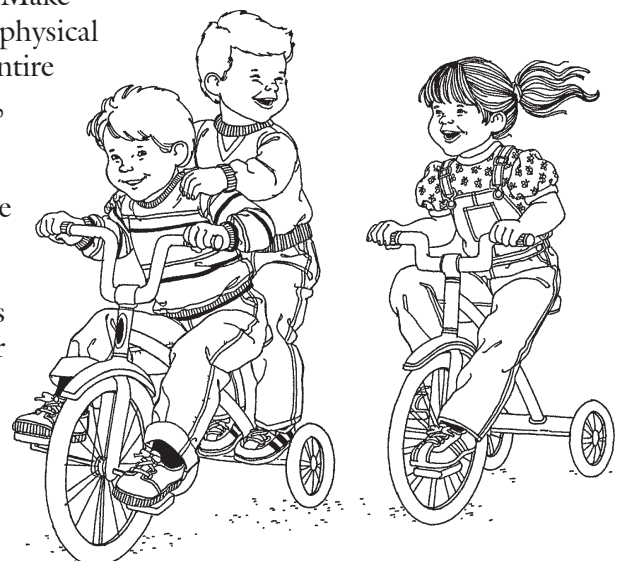
spend no more than two hours of media time per day (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003).

As a parent, you are in a unique position to model the

appropriate use of television, computers, and other forms of technology.

Demonstrate to your children that these technologies can be used in a way that does not impede on other healthy activities. Think about how

For a list of fun and exciting children's games, including instructions on how to play them, go to the following website:
Games Kids Play,
www.gameskidsplay.net.



much time you spend in front of the television or computer screen. Does your television and computer time take precedence over regular physical activities? Offer your children alternatives, and model these alternatives for your children. For example, instead of watching television, use that time to take your children outside on a nature hike. Have your children collect rocks and identify various insects and plants. Activities such as these can be both educational and fun for children and adults.

Children who typically watch a lot of television may complain when it is turned off, but it is remarkable how quickly they come to enjoy other activities if you offer them alternatives and do so with an enthusiastic attitude.



Conclusion

Parents, you are the primary influence in the lives of your children. Your contributions to their growth and development are invaluable. Your children are constantly observing and imitating your words and actions; therefore, make a commitment to be a positive role model for healthy living, and your children will reap benefits that last a lifetime.

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