

Breaking Your Gradeschooler's Unhealthy Food Habit

Just like any good investment, teaching your child healthy habits now will pay off in the long run. Kids who nibble on nutrient-rich foods from a young age are more likely to maintain those good habits later in life. Research shows that children who become overweight are more susceptible to weight-related health issues as adults. Although it can be easy for families to slip into unhealthy food habits, with some practice, you can steer your child toward healthier choices.

Beyond Restriction

When you're trying to break an unhealthy food habit, forbidding certain foods that are already in the home may lead to behavioral problems such as tantrums and sneaking food. "Research has shown that restriction can result in a child overeating the restricted food when it is offered," says Keith Williams, PhD, director of the feeding clinic at the Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital. He suggests keeping the foods you don't want your child to eat out of the house altogether. If you still want to keep your favorite snacks around, don't munch in front of your child unless he or she is allowed to have some, too. It's always better to work on making healthy changes as a family. Your child should know that you're all in this together.

Focus on Healthy Foods

When unhealthy food is missing, be sure to have plenty of healthful alternatives available. Wash and cut fresh fruits and vegetables into pieces ahead of time; then, place them within easy reach in the refrigerator. Gradeschoolers feel more independent when they have options, so try keeping a snack drawer of healthier items and let them choose a food from it every day. Keep the "sometimes" foods out of reach so that you can control when your child eats them. "The goal is to make it easier to obtain the healthy snacks you want your child to eat and more difficult to obtain the foods you don't want him to eat," says Williams.

Resource: eatright.org Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, Andrea Johnson, RD, CSP, LDN