Encouraging our kids to eat healthy should always be a priority for parents. However, due to our busy lifestyles, more kids are eating outside of the home, resulting in bigger portions, higher fat meals and meals lacking key nutrients for healthy growth and development. It is the responsibility of adults, from parents, to teachers, to coaches, to teach our kids healthy eating habits! To help educate our children, the following are some tips and guidelines to keep in mind.

**Encourage a variety of produce.**
By learning to love fruits and vegetables while they are young, kids will develop food preferences that can help lower their risk of heart disease, diabetes and some cancers later in life. Provide cut up vegetables and dip with dinner, prepare a salad with meals. Parents need to be sure to eat vegetables. Kids will see this and will be more likely to try them. Kids ages 2-3 should have 1 cup fruit and vegetables each day; kids ages 4-8 should have 1 ½ cups of fruit and vegetables; and kids 9-12 need 1 ½ cups of fruit and 2 to 2 ½ cups vegetables.

**Keep your kids moving!**
Children should get a total of 60 minutes daily of physical activity, 7 days per week. This exercise does not have to be all at once. It can be 20 minutes of recess, 20 minutes of jumping rope, and 20 minutes of playing tag in the back yard. The important point to remember is that kids NEED to be active every day and “screen time” NEEDS to be limited to no more than 2 hours each day.

**Encourage a low fat diet.**
Children under 2 need a certain amount of fat in their diets for brain and nervous system development. Fat also aids in the absorption of the fat soluble vitamins: vitamins A, D, E and K. This is why children under the age of 2 should drink whole milk, yogurt, and cheese. However, after the age of 2, children should be provided low fat dairy products made from either 1% milk or skim milk. Many kids today are eating too much fat from fast food and fried foods (chips, chicken nuggets, French fries, donuts). To keep your child’s fat intake in check, limit fried foods and encourage grilled or baked, offer appropriate portion sizes, as well as fruit, vegetables and whole grains, which are naturally low in fat.

**Keep bones strong.**
Getting enough calcium at a young age is important to prevent osteoporosis later on. During childhood and adolescence, the body uses calcium to build strong bones. Girls and boys ages 9-18 need 1,300 mg of calcium per day, kids ages 4-8 need 800 mg, and toddlers aged 1-2 years need 500 mg. 1 cup of 1% milk has 300 mg of calcium, 6 oz of yogurt has approximately 250 mg, 1 oz of almonds has 75 mg, and 1 cup of soy milk has 300 mg. By choosing foods that are rich sources of calcium as well as foods fortified with calcium, our kids can reach their needs. However, if a parent is concerned that their child may not be getting enough calcium, there are chewable calcium supplements available.

**Choose Whole Grains.** Whole grains are more satisfying, give us the needed fiber, and may reduce our long term risk of cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. On average, most school age children need 6-8 ounces of grains a day and active teens may need as many as 9-10 ounces per day. At least half of those servings should come from whole grain. One slice of bread, a ½ cup of cooked pasta, rice, or cereal are examples of one serving. Good whole grain sources are brown rice, whole wheat pasta, oatmeal, whole grain cereals and crackers.

**Limit sugar-sweetened beverages.** Sodas and other sweetened drinks such as lemonade, ice tea, fruit punch, and even fruit juices contribute significantly to total calories and should be limited. One can of soda has 10 teaspoons of sugar!

**Offer fish.** The American Heart Association recommends everyone should aim for two servings of fish each week. However, some popular seafood items contain high amounts of mercury that we should not let our children eat. Children should not eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish. These are large predatory fish that tend to accumulate high levels of mercury. Kids can safely consume up to 12 ounces of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury: shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, Pollock (used in fish sticks), and catfish. However, it is recommended that no more than 6 ounces (one can) from albacore premium white tuna each week.

Bottom Line: It is the adult’s responsibility to offer and provide healthy foods that our children can choose from and learn to enjoy. Parents should keep the above guidelines in mind when making the grocery shopping list and preparing meals and snacks.

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