

How to Sell "Healthy" to Kids

Mike wanted his 14 year-old son to "eat healthy." Not only did he want this day-to-day action, Mike wanted his son to *want* to do it, too. That's a tall order for kids facing tempting food at every turn. So, how do you sell the idea of healthy to your child? And do it without *overselling* it?

To be successful at helping your child embrace healthy eating, it will take more than a rule from you, or a handful of nutritious items in the kitchen. Selling "healthy" to kids requires lifestyle and attitude shifts, not just a mandate of eating rules. With just a little insight, you can skip the pressure (and the mistakes) and let the model of healthful eating and healthy living sink in naturally.

Understand Developmental Stages

Children are black-and-white thinkers and learn best by hands-on activities. To tell them vegetables are healthy pales in comparison to letting them make a salad or help with a stir-fry. Teens, on the other hand, may want to eat healthy if there is an immediate benefit: a leaner body, more energy, or clearer skin. "Healthy" has to have some pay-off for teens. Otherwise, it's just another adult telling a teen what to do, which will make many teens shut out the ideas.

Let Them Come to You

Instead of driving home healthy eating, encourage conversation about food, eating and nutrition on a regular basis. Welcome questions and comments about what your teen is hearing from her peers, and be a font of information when asked. When kids and teens initiate conversation, especially with questions, their ears are wide open.

Understand the Food Reality You're Up Against

What kids and teens are eating today is fairly grim: lots of unhealthy snacks, resulting in high amounts of sugar, fat and calories, and low amounts of important nutrients like calcium, vitamin D and fiber. And, there are unhealthy foods waiting to tempt children almost everywhere they go, from school to a friend's house or a community event.

Guidelines and Boundaries Work

Although you cannot fight food choices, nor should you, you can set limits and boundaries about the types and amounts your child (and family) eats on a regular basis. You don't want to be too lax around sweets and unhealthy foods, nor do you want to be too controlling. The best way is to end up somewhere in the middle, enjoying indulgent sweets occasionally, but keeping them in their place.

It's an Inside Job

Remember, anything we choose to do is ultimately something that is important to us. The same goes for kids and teens. Motivation to eat well comes from within, and you want to create this internal drive for healthful eating over time. Make healthful eating the standard in your home. Make connections between good nutrition and feeling good, fueling exercise with food and performance, and eating healthfully with being healthy, not sick. Connecting these dots helps to add value to the lifestyle choices your child makes over time.

Tweak the Environment

Your home as a healthy haven sets the tone for how your family eats and behaves. If you stock your kitchen with healthy food options, serve up healthy meals and snacks regularly and have reasonable limits around unhealthy items, your kids will be used to these norms, which may make eating outside of your home a little bit easier.

Parents as Role Models

Parents are the image children will mirror. Try to eat healthfully, be active, get enough sleep and commit to all the other healthy behaviors you want to see in your child.

With these strategies in mind, you won't have to sell healthy or nutritious eating to your child — it will evolve over time, naturally.

Resource: www.eatright.com Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics