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# Parenting the Preschooler

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## Eat and Live Healthfully for Your Child's Sake!

How much food is on the plate makes a difference in how much children eat. The bigger the portion, the more children eat... and they're not even aware of it.

The percentage of children and adolescents who are obese has doubled in the last 20 years. "What's happening with children is a disaster," says Kelly Brownell, an obesity researcher at Yale University. "We've had to stop using the term adult-onset diabetes because the disease is now being diagnosed in children and teens." Overweight and obesity may soon cause as much preventable disease and death as cigarette smoking, according to the Surgeon General.

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### **Teach your child through your own healthful habits.**

All you-can-eat buffets, "super-sizing" at fast food restaurants, oversized bakery and the mentality of "finish all the food on your plate" encourage people to eat more than they need based on actual hunger. Parents who overeat themselves may inadvertently teach their children to eat more than they're hungry for. This may contribute to poor eating habits that ultimately cause some kids to become too fat.

Researchers at the Pennsylvania State University studied eating patterns of young girls and found that some girls tended to eat

yummy snacks even when they weren't feeling hungry. Those girls were much more likely to be overweight than girls who didn't want to eat when they were already feeling full. In addition, parents who tried to restrict how much their children ate were more likely to have children who ate when they weren't hungry.

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### **You are the role model for your child.**

Rather than restrict your child's access to food, be a good role model and try these tips:

- ◆ Make sure you have nutritious foods to offer your children at snack time
- ◆ Offer small portions and allow a hungry child to ask for "seconds."
- ◆ Give the child structured choices, such as pudding or yogurt for today's snack.
- ◆ Encourage children to focus on their own hunger and fullness as a guide to when they start and stop eating.

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### **Young children naturally eat when hungry and stop when full.**

Babies eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full. Yet when children observe their parents' poorly controlled eating habits, these habits are passed onto the child, thus reducing the child's ability to regulate his or

her own dietary intake. Their bodies' inborn cues for hunger and satiety are overrun by the external cues telling them what and how much they should be eating. Childhood obesity often tracks into adulthood along with the accompanying health risks.

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### Messages from Television

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Children get external cues from those around them as well as from television. Researchers have found that children's programming carries food commercials that promote a high fat, high sugar and low fiber diet.

What can you do as a parent?

- ◆ Be a positive role model for your child by eating healthy foods from the food guide pyramid.
- ◆ Remember you are in charge of your child's TV watching.
- ◆ As your child matures, make your child aware of the purpose of television advertising: to interest children in trying a particular product.
- ◆ Help your child understand what constitutes a healthy diet by sharing the food guide pyramid with them and have them check the foods they eat on the pyramid to see how their diet compares. (See Parenting the Preschooler "Daily Food Guide for Young Children" Feb, 2002.)

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### Live Actively

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It is critical to recognize the importance of physical activity in the early stage of your child's development and the need for activity to maintain good health. Just as a parent is the role model for their child's eating habits, so that parent also can be the role model for their child's physical activity. Fitness feels good

and contributes to maintaining a healthy weight. For a child to develop a healthy, active lifestyle, they need to find activities that suit their interests. Try starting with just one new activity a week and see what sparks your child's interest. Assign regular household chores age appropriate for your child. Make sure their chores are active ones like picking up their toys, bringing in the mail, sweeping the floor, or shaking out small rugs. Let them know how proud you are that they are able to take on those tasks.

When parents are playful, kids will join in. Dance around the house to your child's favorite music and create a new dance step. Exercise can happen while you're having fun. Build more activity into your usual family routine. Take the stairs instead of the elevator, park at the far end of the parking lot, walk together as a family instead of driving to nearby places. Take walks and fly kites at a park.

Children grow at different rates and through numerous spurts, so it's important that adults not overreact to a child's "pudgy" appearance. Check with your doctor if you are concerned about your child's weight.

Eat moderately, an amount that feels right and listen to your body so you eat when hungry and stop when satisfied. Encourage your child to do the same and be that positive role model by keeping active in your own way every day.

#### Sources:

- American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2002; 76:226-31.
- Family Information Services*, May 2002.
- Lindner Early Childhood Training Institute Newsletter*, May 2002.
- Nutrition Action Health Letter*, December 2001.
- Nutrition for Family Living*, May 2002.

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