



Break Your Kid's Bad Food Habits

Does he live on pasta or freak when you serve anything green? You really can get him to start eating better.

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Your child's hair-twirling, breath-holding, or nose-picking may drive you nuts, but most of these common kid habits tend to vanish with time—and they may disappear sooner if you simply ignore them. However, if he's gotten into a less than stellar eating routine, don't assume he'll eventually expand his repertoire on his own. "Eating habits from childhood definitely can carry over into adulthood, so it's best to deal with them now," says Jennifer Trachtenberg, M.D., author of *Good Kids, Bad Habits*. Since you don't want to make every meal a battleground, you'll need to take small, smart, and even

If you bake, keep the goodies out of sight.

sneaky steps to help your child change his ways. We've got expert action plans for kids' five major eating traps.

Nibbling Nonstop

WHY IT'S BAD

Snacking all day means your child won't be hungry at mealtime. Constant munching (even if it's mostly healthy stuff) also prevents her from learning to recognize her own feelings of hunger and fullness—and that's an important skill she'll need throughout life.

HOW TO BREAK THE HABIT

* **Set a schedule.** Kids thrive on structure, so serve two or three daily snacks (mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and bedtime if she's hungry)—and try to have your child sit at the table for them. When she asks for a snack at another time, especially if she's just eaten and probably isn't even hungry, remind her that snacktime is coming. (If you're not comfortable denying her, offer a piece of fruit to tide her over.) "That can be hard at first, but the payoff is that your child's hunger will be better regulated and more predictable," says Linda Piette, R.D., author of *Just Two More Bites!* That said, you should leave some wiggle room in your snack schedule, depending on the day's events.

* **Make snacks filling.** A snack that includes some protein or fat will keep kids satisfied longer, so they're less likely to feel like nibbling. Some combos to try: peanut butter spread on graham-cracker squares, a slice of cheese melted onto whole-grain crackers, or apple slices dunked into fruit-flavored yogurt.

* **Keep junk out of sight.** It's harder to say no when you have all sorts of goodies in the open—and at little arms' reach. Rearrange your pantry and fridge so the only stuff you don't mind having them grab (like baby carrots or cups of applesauce) is front and center.

Drinking Juice 24/7

WHY IT'S BAD

A small amount of 100 percent juice can be a healthy part of a child's diet. However, more than a half cup or so a day fills up little tummies, so there's



A 4-year-old downs about 17 teaspoons of sugar a day!

less room for food, and it may cause toddlers to get diarrhea. Though research hasn't found a link between drinking juice and gaining too much weight, it's definitely a source of extra calories (about 110 in a cup of apple juice) that add up quickly. It can supply vitamin C, but so can other foods: Your kid will get his day's worth of C from half an orange or a half cup of broccoli.

HOW TO BREAK THE HABIT

* **Ditch the sippies.** Serve juice in a regular cup at the table. Kids won't be able to gulp it down as quickly (or cart it around the house all afternoon).

* **Offer water first.** Don't give your child juice when he's really thirsty—he'll guzzle way too much, way too quickly, says Marilyn Tanner-Blasiar, R.D., a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. Start handing out plain water after playground time or soccer practice. (Trust us: Thirsty kids will drink it.) Then let him enjoy the taste of smaller amounts of juice later, when he's not so parched.

* **Dilute, dilute, dilute.** Water juice down by at least half. Use seltzer to make it more fun and a squirt of lemon juice to intensify the flavor. Just remember, offering diluted juice all day defeats the purpose. Make sure that the juice-and-water mix doesn't exceed one to two cups a day.

Overdosing on Sugar

WHY IT'S BAD

Babies are born with a preference for sweet stuff, so it's no surprise that all kids love it. But added sugar—the kind in desserts and sweet snacks—also provides a lot of calories without a lot of nutrition. Food surveys reveal that toddlers take in the equivalent of 14 teaspoons of sugar every day, while 4- to 5-year-olds get about 17.

HOW TO BREAK THE HABIT

* **Set limits.** Instead of going cold turkey, establish some basic (and fair) rules—then stick to them. Maybe it's a one-sweet-treat-a-day policy or perhaps a couple of small goodies

(like a small square of chocolate or a bite-size cookie). Whatever it is, be clear about it and give your kids some choice, says Tanner-Blasiar. For instance, ask, "Do you want to have your sweet treat now or after dinner?" Keeping a limited number of sugary foods in the house will help.

*** Scout out sugar.** Look at the sugar content of the foods your child's eating—especially the ones you may not consider treats, like breakfast cereal and fruit snacks. Every four grams is the equivalent of a teaspoon of sugar. Eating a lot of sweet foods all day will stimulate her appetite for even more, so switch to low-sugar versions of favorites like yogurt and cereal and compare labels to find the best choices.

*** Don't assume.** If you automatically trot out cookies and ice cream after dinner, you won't give your child a chance to satisfy her sweet tooth with healthier things, says Tanner-Blasiar. She just might go gaga over a sliced banana with cinnamon sprinkled on it, chunks of fresh pineapple, or strawberries topped with a dollop of fat-free whipped topping.

Eating Too Many Carbs

WHY IT'S BAD

Children who refuse protein-rich foods like meat and poultry may not get all the valuable nutrients they need, such as zinc and highly absorbable iron. If they're eating a lot of carbohydrates like white bread and noodles, which the body digests quickly, they'll also complain that they're hungry again pretty soon after meals.

HOW TO BREAK THE HABIT

*** Go soft.** "Many kids don't like meat because of the texture," says Piette. "It can be tough and takes a long time to chew." That's one reason most children love chicken nuggets—the meat inside is chopped up and easy to eat. Try braising meats and poultry (cook them with broth in a covered pan), or use the slow cooker to make them supersoft. Hide lean ground beef or turkey in spaghetti sauce and casseroles or finely diced chicken in soup. Your child might also go for lunch meats like turkey or roast beef rolled up in a tortilla.

*** Provide protein.** If your child won't budge on meat, include some kind of

Adding just a sprinkle of melted reduced-fat cheese will make veggies taste better, plus it helps the body absorb essential vitamins.

protein source at meals such as beans, eggs, and low-fat dairy products. But don't stress out too much: Most kids get plenty of protein. The average toddler only needs about 16 grams a day (roughly 24 for a preschooler). A cup of milk has eight grams, two tablespoons of peanut butter have seven to eight, and a reduced-fat string cheese has six to eight.

*** Upgrade the carbs.** Whole grains are more filling, plus they're packed with fiber and nutrients like vitamin E and magnesium. Dr. Trachtenberg recommends the "Rule of Three" when you're choosing cold cereal: at least three grams of fiber and protein per

serving, and sugar should not be one of the first three ingredients listed.

Refusing Veggies

WHY IT'S BAD

Vegetables are rich in vitamins A and C, plus fiber. You can get those in fruit too, but learning to love vegetables is still important: Kids who eat veggies grow up to be adults who eat veggies, and eating lots of fruits and vegetables is linked to a better diet, healthier body weight, and lower risk of disease.

HOW TO BREAK THE HABIT

*** Don't be afraid of fat.** A little bit of healthy fat makes veggies taste better, plus it helps the body absorb the

vitamins. A teaspoon of light margarine or a sprinkle of reduced-fat shredded cheese adds fewer than 50 calories and a couple grams of fat—and may mean your child actually eats his broccoli.

*** Make it special.** Let your kids help you create an "appetizer tray" of veggies for them to munch on while you're fixing dinner, along with some hummus or low-fat ranch dressing for dip. "This does take some extra time, but it can make all the difference in the world," says Dr. Trachtenberg.

*** Be cool.** Never pressure or punish your kids over any food, vegetables included, or you're headed for some serious power struggles. Actions speak louder than words, so always have veggies on the table at meals (put new ones alongside "safety" veggies they already know), eat a helping or two yourself, and casually mention how fresh and delicious they are. It may take weeks (or months), but your child just might ask to try them someday. □

PICKY PRESCHOOLER?

Check out mypyramid.gov/preschoolers, the USDA's new site for parents of 2- to 5-year-olds. You can create a customized eating plan based on your child's age, sex, and activity level; analyze his BMI and compare his height with that of other kids his age; and get great ideas for kid-friendly meals and nutritious snacks.



Log on to parentsmag.com to see our list of the 20 best-ever healthy snacks for kids.