

# Helping Your Overweight Child

Submitted by Joanne Knowlton, Nutrition Connections  
UNH Cooperative Extension

Healthy eating and physical activity are keys to your child's well-being. Eating too much and exercising too little may lead to overweight and related health problems that may follow children into their adult years. You can take an active role to help your child, and your whole family, learn healthy eating and physical activity habits that last a lifetime. Here are some suggestions for encouraging healthy eating habits:

Buy and serve more fruits and vegetables (fresh, frozen, canned, or dried). Let your child help choose them at the store.

Buy fewer soft drinks and high-fat or high-calorie snack foods like chips, cookies, and candy. These snacks may be OK once in a while, but always keep healthy snack foods on hand. Offer the healthy snacks more often at snack times.

Make sure your child eats breakfast every day. Breakfast may provide your child with the energy he or she needs to listen and learn in school. Skipping breakfast can leave your child hungry, tired, and looking for less healthy foods later in the day.

Eat fast food less often. When you do visit a fast food restaurant, encourage your family to choose the healthier options, such as salads with low-fat dressing or small sandwiches without cheese or mayonnaise.

Offer your child water or low-fat milk more often than fruit juice. Low-fat milk and milk products are important for your child's development. One hundred percent fruit juice is a healthy choice but is high in calories.

Limit the amount of saturated fat and trans-fat in your family's diet. Instead, obtain most of your fats from sources such as fish, vegetable oils, nuts, and seeds.

Plan healthy meals and eat together as a family. Eating together at meal times helps children learn to enjoy a variety of foods.

Do not get discouraged if your child will not eat a new food the first time it is served. Some kids will need to have a new food served to them 10 times or more before they will eat it.

Try not to use food as a reward when encouraging kids to eat. Promising dessert to a child for eating vegetables, for example, sends the message that vegetables are less valuable than dessert. Kids learn to dislike foods they think are less valuable.

Start with small servings and let your child ask for more if he or she is still hungry. It is up to you to provide your child with healthy meals and snacks, but your child should be allowed to choose how much food he or she will eat.

Be aware that some high-fat or high-sugar foods and beverages may be strongly marketed to kids. Usually these products are associated with cartoon characters, offer free toys, and come in bright packages. Talk with your child about the importance of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other healthy foods – even if these foods are not often advertised on TV or in stores.

Your child might enjoy trying the following healthy snacks:

Fresh fruit; fruit canned in juice or light syrup; small amounts of dried fruits, such as raisins, apple rings, or apricots; fresh vegetables, such as baby carrots, cucumber, zucchini, or tomatoes; low-sugar, whole-grain cereal with low-fat milk.

Like adults, kids need daily physical activity. Here are some ways to help your child move every day:

Set a good example. If your child sees that you are physically active and that you have fun doing it, he or she is more likely to be active throughout life.

Encourage your child to join a sports team or class, at school or at your local community or recreation center.

Be active together as a family. Assign active chores, such as washing the car or vacuuming, and plan active outings such as a family bike ride or a walk.

Set limits on the amount of time your family spends watching TV, playing video games, and being on the computer.

Encourage your child to get up and move during commercials and discourage snacking when the TV is on.

Keep in mind that a pre-adolescent child's body is not ready for adult-style physical activity, such as lifting heavy weights, and that fun physical activities that kids choose to do on their own are often best. Kids need about 60 minutes of physical activity a day, but this does not have to happen all at one. Several short 10- or even 5-minute periods of activity throughout the day are just as good. If your children are not used to being active, encourage them to start with what they can do and build up to 60 minutes a day.

Remember that children are good learners and often mimic what they see, so try to be a positive role model. If you choose healthy foods and active pastimes for yourself, your children will learn to follow healthy habits that last a lifetime.

Source: Weight-control Information Network, [www.win.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov).

*The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension is an equal opportunity educator and employer. UNH, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture and New Hampshire counties cooperating. "Helping You Put Knowledge and Research to Work."*