



Lisa Drayer's daughter, Blue Roomer Brooks Strumeyer, grocery shopping.

## How to Develop Healthy Eating Habits in Children

BY LISA DRAYER, MA, RD

**I**MUST ADMIT that as a parent, I find it incredibly challenging to instill healthy eating habits in my children. This is despite the fact that as a nutritionist, I have access to a plethora of information about healthy eating. Between pizza parties, birthday parties, snacks, holiday treats, and after-school stops for Dunkin Donuts, there's just no escaping the junk food trap. While the food choices that surround us are not going to disappear anytime soon, the good news is, there are things within our control as parents that we can do to influence our children's eating habits.

### Parenting Style and Effects on Body Weight

Does parenting style matter when it comes to raising healthy eaters? It seems to play a role, according to at least one study of four year olds published in the journal *Pediatrics*. In the study, which involved close to 900 children, researchers found that when looking at four different parenting styles, authoritarian parenting, where rules are set without consideration of a child's views, was associated with the highest risk of a child becoming overweight.

Specifically, researchers found that children with authoritarian parents had almost five times the risk of becoming overweight compared to children whose parents had a more authoritative parenting style, where a parent maintains clear boundaries and rules, but is also respectful of a child's feelings and

preferences. Additionally, children of permissive (i.e. indulgent) and neglectful parents were twice as likely to be overweight compared to children of authoritative parents.

Why the link between strict parents and increased risk of becoming overweight? Perhaps the child of a very strict parent may not learn to pay attention to internal hunger cues if his or her parent is telling him when to stop eating. So instead of stopping when he or she is full, he may continue to eat if his parents are forcing him to finish a meal. The article also suggested that strict parenting without parental sensitivity might lead to emotional eating among children. On the flipside, parents who offer a supportive environment and respect their children's feelings may be better able to help their children make healthy decisions when it comes to food.

### How Parents Can Help Children Develop Healthy Eating Habits

Below are some tips to help your child adopt a healthy relationship with food:

- 1. Provide a supportive environment to develop healthy habits.** An authoritative parenting style means that you apply rules, but there is some flexibility, particularly when it comes to your child's views and desires. For example, if your child asks for a candy bar when you are paying

— continues on page 18 —



for groceries at the supermarket, offer to buy a smaller candy like a lollipop instead. “You still want to provide some boundaries about eating unhealthy foods, but not totally deprive them,” says study author Dr. Kay Rhee. Also, give your child some decision-making power. For example, an authoritarian parent may insist that a child eats a vegetable on her plate, while an authoritative parent might offer three different vegetables to give the child some options. If you respect the fact that your child has preferences for foods, you will be more likely to encourage healthy habits.

**2. Stock your house with healthy foods and snacks.**

Parents play an important role as gatekeepers. If you keep a bowl of fruit in the kitchen, your child will be more likely to grab an apple or a banana for a snack. Instead of shopping alone, take your child with you to the supermarket and ask him to choose which fruits and snacks he would like to have at home. Try to resist bringing junk foods into the house.

**3. Talk about where food comes from.** “Teaching healthy eating habits is not a science; it’s an art,” says Blue Room teacher Roberta Willenken. “There is no science that tells us what is going to work but mindfulness and explaining to children where food comes from helps.” Examples include explaining how bread is made from wheat, or how vegetables are grown. Reading books about nutritious foods also encourages healthy eating habits. Sun Roomers enjoy reading books about fruits and vegetables (see sidebar).

**4. Involve children in meal preparation.** In the Blue Room, teachers report that children are more likely to eat clementines after they peel them in preparation for snack time. Sun Roomers do a unit on making vegetable soup, where each child brings in a vegetable, which the children taste before cutting it up for the soup. At home, children can help with mixing ingredients, tearing lettuce leaves, shucking corn, and shaking seasonings on vegetables and meats.

**5. Skip the clean plate club.** Research suggests that when parents insist that their preschoolers finish their plates, these children are more likely to ask for larger portions when they eat outside of the home. It is thought that children do this not necessarily because they are hungrier, but because they lack control over how much they can eat at home. Being a member of the “Clean Plate Club” also prevents children from listening to their own internal satiety cues, and this can lead to overeating later on. Encourage a positive relationship with food by allowing your child to eat until he or she is full.

**6. If your child enjoys sweets, give small portions instead of depriving them.** And encourage them to eat healthier foods first. “We tell children to make sure they’ve had enough food to feed their brains and body, like protein, fruit, or anything of nutritional value, before they have dessert,” says Roberta. Choose pre-portioned snacks, like 100-calorie packs of chips or cookies, or a low-fat ice cream cone.

**7. Link health messages to outcomes that children care about.** Telling a child that eating healthy foods will allow her to perform better in school or in sports can be a big motivator, and is much more meaningful than describing an outcome that does not have a strong meaning to a child, like a decreased risk for obesity or heart disease.

**8. Be a good role model.** Children learn from role models, and their top role models include mom and dad. It’s not realistic to think that your child will choose carrot sticks as a snack if they see you indulging in cake. Set a good example, and your child will be more likely to maintain healthy eating habits. Blue Room teacher Heather Egert says that after she tasted an apple and said, “It’s sweet!” a Blue Roomer agreed to taste it. And he said, “I like it!” before it even touched his mouth. ■

*Lisa Drayer is a Nutritionist and the mother of Blue Roomer Brooke Strumeyer.*

## Food-related picture books recommended by the Sun Room teachers

- *Little Pea* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal
- *Vegetable Soup* by Modesitt
- *Growing Vegetable Soup* by Lois Ehlert
- *What Am I?: Looking Through Shapes at Apples and Grapes* by N.N. Charles
- *How Are you Peeling* by Saxton Freymann and Joost Elferris
- *Gus and Button* by Saxton Freymann and Joost Elferris
- *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss and Crockett Johnson