

# Empowering kids encourages healthier eating

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Consistent and unemotional meal times equal better eating patterns in the long run, said nutritional counselor and registered dietitian Julie Feldman.

She advocates not making your kitchen a short order restaurant for kids, but helping them learn better eating habits through shared interest in the meal planning and preparation and open communication about food.

"Kids quickly learn that they have power over the adults," Feldman said, and in a power struggle the kids will win if the parents give in.

Feldman, who is on the staff at the office of pediatrician Dr. Penny Baumeier in Brighton said, "I'm a big proponent of consistent and unemotional meal times." That means, when the kids start to refuse to eat, don't give in and start offering them other things. "I talk to clients about staying unemotional and giving them a sense of control at the dinner table." And, that she said is key to making meal times less of a power struggle.

Kids like attention, she said and whether it's negative or positive attention, they crave more of it from their parents. By not using food as a reward or punishment, you'll lessen the attention kids get around food and make mealtimes more pleasant experiences.

She said empowering kids to have a vested interest in what they're eating helps. "Make a list of 30 or so potential dinners and let them pick seven that they would enjoy."

Then, she said when it comes to shopping, take the kids along so they see the whole process.

"A lot of parents don't take kids to the store because they are in a hurry or don't want to deal with it," but taking them along and teaching kids where the food comes from and making them part of the process will help them want to eat more fruits and vegetables in the long run.

There are dozens of recipes and meal ideas at [www.eatingwell.com](http://www.eatingwell.com).

Another way that parents can keep a handle on mealtime and improve kids' palates is to make sure they try things - and more than once.

"Everyone has certain foods they don't like," said Feldman, but "make sure they try things at least 15 times before it becomes a 'no' food for them."

She said using a sticker chart or check boxes to make sure a food gets tried at least 15 times is a good way to assure that it's not a three-strikes and it's off the menu proposal.



Nutrition counselor and registered dietitian Julie Feldman. Submitted photo.

"In most cases, I've found that most adults like most foods," she said, but it's because they acquired a taste for some of them over time.

Trying new foods often is a good way to

expand your child's food repertoire, too, she said. "Most kids have five or fewer foods they eat consistently, and only as many as 10 in their average repertoire."

Feldman said its parents who often don't

want to "rock the boat" when it comes to adding in new foods, so they fill in with everyday staples and easy foods.

"Kids are way more adaptable than we tend to think," she said. They will often eat what adults eat, if their parents communicate with them.

"The whole thing needs to start with a conversation," said Feldman, adding, "Nobody ever communicates with [kids]. Usually they are just told, 'no you can't eat buttered noodles for dinner,' but not told why."

Feldman said it's important to talk to kids about why we need to eat the way we do. "We keep our kids safe from strangers, buckle them into safety belts in the car, and put helmets on them on a bicycle, and yet don't tell them why it's not OK to eat nothing but a bag of Doritos and a Coke for lunch. It's no wonder they eat garbage all the time."

The communication doesn't necessarily have to be about weight either, Feldman said. It can and should focus on health, athletic performance and even their ability to perform well in school.

"I sat down once and talked to a 3-year old who was into super heroes about what Superman needs to eat to stay strong," she said, adding, "All you have to do is talk to them about food in terms of things they can relate to, and it makes sense to them."

One thing is certain, though, Feldman said, "We need to focus more on what we feed kids."

She suggests that children should have carbohydrates containing up to five plus their age grams of fiber per day, and not all at one meal. So a child age 10 should eat 15 grams of fiber per day, spread out over three meals and a healthy snack.

"What people don't realize is that most of the carbohydrates kids eat don't have any fiber in them," she said, like Veggie Straws, baked potato chips, corn chips, and other seemingly "healthy" snacks. "Most things we feed are kids are fiberless, and all those things contribute to attention issues, weight issues, and fatigue."

She suggests making fruits and vegetables available as snacks. Put cut up vegetables and a hummus or low fat dip within reach. "No kid is going to go into the refrigerator and grab a whole red pepper, for example, but if it is cut up and ready to eat, they will."

She also said be a good role model for your kids. If you eat well, so will your kids. If they see you exercising and getting your five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, they will follow suit.

Check out Feldman's website at [dietitian-julie.com](http://dietitian-julie.com), you can also e-mail her at [realnutrition@ymail.com](mailto:realnutrition@ymail.com).