

Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



Fact Sheet

Do as I Do: Parents as Nutritional Role Models

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Children are “copycats”; they like to do what someone else is doing. Children are mimics; they model behaviors they see in others.

From birth, infants learn behaviors parents are exhibiting. It’s a “monkey see ... monkey do” process of learning. Parents intentionally teach children to crawl, walk, say new sounds and words, how to dress themselves, how to use the toilet, and on and on. However, often parents are unaware what children are actually learning from others’ behaviors, television programs, etc., as well. Children are constantly watching and learning without parents realizing the effect they have on their children.

Social skills, table manners, attitudes, and healthy lifestyles are taught by example. A parent who says “I never drink milk” or “Don’t serve me broccoli” is teaching a child to not drink milk or eat broccoli. Since parents are the primary teachers and role models in their children’s lives, setting the example for their children is very important to the learning process. Setting the pattern for good eating habits is the parent’s responsibility when deciding which foods to buy, choosing foods for family menus, and selecting snack foods to keep on hand. Verbalizing our likes or dislikes about foods also teaches children which foods they should like or dislike.

Think about your own eating habits. Do you choose and prepare the foods your parents ate? How willing are you to try a new food? How often do you express your likes and dislikes when your children are within hearing distance? What foods do you offer your children? Do they

include a limited variety based on your preferences?

A study of nearly 200 five-year-old girls examined feeding practices and dietary intake and found that children are more likely to eat more fruits and vegetables when their parents also eat these foods. Also, parents who didn’t eat the recommended number of servings of fruits and vegetables (5 each day), but pressured their daughters to eat them, couldn’t convince their children to eat more. The girls who were pressured to eat more fruits and vegetables actually consumed less than the girls who modeled their parents’ eating habits. Pressuring children to eat does not seem to be the answer to developing good eating habits. A “do as I say” parenting style is not as effective as a “do as I do” style.

If children see their parents try new foods and eat them, they are more likely to try them also. Children who have the opportunity to taste and become familiar with a variety of foods are more likely to have a greater variety in their diet and more likely to make responsible choices.

Parents can teach, but the most powerful teaching comes in modeling the behavior you want your children to copy. If you want your child to eat broccoli, eat broccoli!

References

- Fisher, J. O. (2002). Parental influences on young girls’ fruit and vegetable, micronutrient and fat intakes. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 102, 58–64.
- Satter, Ellyn. (1987). *How to get your child to eat ... but not too much*. Palo Alto, CA: Bull Publishing Co.

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