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10 TIPS FOR RAISING SUCCESSFUL EATERS

Parents often want to know how to raise a “healthy” eater, usually referring to what foods their children are eating. I prefer the term “successful” eater because I believe it captures a broader perspective including not only what, but also how, children eat. Because the term “successful eater” is not commonly used, I will describe what I mean. What does a “successful eater” look like? A successful eater is someone who likes eating and feels good about it. A successful eater is interested in food and likes a variety of foods. A successful eater enjoys being at the table and has fairly decent table manners – most of the time, at least. A successful eater knows when they are full or hungry based upon their own internal cues. A successful eater will try some new foods and will politely refuse foods that he or she doesn’t want to eat. A successful eater can make do with less than favorite foods and can eat in places other than home.

It’s important to raise successful eaters for a number of reasons. First, variety in diet is important for children’s (and adults’) health and nutrition. Second, learning to recognize internal cues of hunger and fullness is important in maintaining healthy weight. And finally, learning how to tolerate less than favorite foods and learning appropriate behaviors related to food are important in the development of positive social skills.

You may be asking yourself, how do I get one of these successful eaters? What can I do to raise one? Here are some tips:

1. **Have family meals.** If you can only do one thing, I would argue that this is the most important. Research has shown that children who eat meals regularly with their families

develop better eating habits, do better at school, and are also at lower risk for obesity, substance abuse, and disordered eating.

2. **Serve meals family style.** Allow your children to serve themselves from all the food you put out on the family table.
3. **Always include one or two foods with meals that you know your child usually likes.** Avoid catering to your children and only preparing foods that they request, but always make sure that there's something, even if it's just bread, on the table that they will eat.
4. **Don't introduce too many new foods at once.** Try to pair new, unfamiliar foods with familiar foods.
5. **Maintain a positive social and emotional environment at the table.** If your child's eating is an issue, don't make it the focus of mealtime conversation.
6. **Understand the typical development of eating and progression of food acceptance.** Know that it is normal for toddlers and preschoolers to be somewhat finicky, to take many times to learn to like a new food, and to vary from day to day in how much they eat and what they eat.
7. **Be a good eating role model yourself.** Look at your own eating behaviors and diet and examine any unintended messages your behaviors may be sending to your child. What you do matters more than what you say!
8. **Understand the division of responsibility in feeding.** Familiarize yourself with Ellyn Satter's classic work, stating that parents are responsible for the what, when, and where of feeding, while children are responsible for whether and how much.
9. **Relax about individual meals.** Your child's health is not determined by the nutritional value of a single meal. Look at patterns in food intake over a longer period of time than one meal – more like a week's worth of meals.
10. **Have patience.** Raising a successful eater takes time. There will be ups and downs along the way, but stick with it, don't give up, and have faith!

Kathleen Cuneo, Ph.D. is the founder and director of Dinner Together, LLC, (www.dinnertogether.com) which provides consultations to families on meal-related issues as well as expertise to parents about how to raise successful eaters. For more information e-mail info@dinnertogether.com.