

Raising Healthy Kids in Today's Food Environment

*by Natalie D. Muth, MD, MPH, MBA, RDN, FAAP, FACSM,
DABOM and Cassandra Padgett, MS*

Studies show that more than half of the food we eat is ultraprocessed. From birthday parties and social gatherings filled with cake and candy, youth sports practices and games with sports drinks and packaged snacks, to fast food and takeout, ultraprocessed food is everywhere.

Ultraprocessed foods are typically high in added sugars, salt and hard-to-pronounce ingredients and low in fiber and other nutrients. They are usually relatively inexpensive, convenient and specially formulated to taste delicious and leave us craving more. As a general rule, they are foods one could not easily make in a home kitchen. Unfortunately, they also are increasingly linked with serious health harms like heart problems, type 2 diabetes, attention and focus difficulties and depression.

Eating more “real foods” like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds can go a long way to helping improve health. But the truth is we live in a food environment that makes healthy eating very challenging for everyone, especially busy families. Realistically, what can parents do to help their kids improve their nutrition? Here are 10 ideas to help your family eat more real food this summer. No need to do them all. Starting small with one or two ideas adds up.



1.

Start the day with a healthy

breakfast. Eating a healthy breakfast sets the stage for the rest of the day. Instead of skipping breakfast or grabbing a sugary cereal or processed bar, try plain yogurt with berries or slow-cooker oatmeal [see Recipe].

2.

Visit a local farmers market. Summer is the best time to eat in-season produce which is packed with nutrients and sweetness. Most farmers markets offer free samples, which is a fun and affordable way for kids to try new vegetables and fruits.

3.

Teach the teens to grill. Learning to grill is an important life skill for teens to learn. Plus, they will be more likely to eat what they help prepare. Not to mention grilling makes for quick meals with little cleanup. Grilled vegetables are a flavorful, colorful and crunchy side dish to offer with barbecued meat or fish.



4.

Offer fruit and vegetables for

snacks. Swap out some of the ultraprocessed snacks for fruits and vegetables. Summer is a great time to do this as many delicious fruits and vegetables are in season, making them extra sweet and less expensive. Taking a few minutes to rinse and chop after shopping can save time when packing lunches or snacks. Kids are more likely to eat what is offered when they are hungriest, like after sports practice or summer camp, or at the pool or park. That is the perfect time to offer a vegetable tray with dip. Leaving a fruit bowl on the counter can boost kids' fruit intake.



Tip in Action: Bring a container of sliced fruit or vegetables when on the go this summer. Try a bento box, a TikTok-trending "snackle box," or a lunch box with a small ice pack. Chopping a watermelon and rinsing grapes or berries is a refreshing snack for the park or pool. Cold and crunchy vegetables like sliced cucumbers, sugar snap peas or bell peppers can also be refreshing on a warm day.



Slow Cooker Apple Cinnamon Oatmeal

This tasty, nutrient-dense, no-added-sugar breakfast can be prepped in just a few minutes before going to bed. Turn on the slow cooker and wake up to an effortless healthy breakfast the whole family will enjoy.

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 7-8 hours (low) or 3-4 hours (high)

Servings: 4

Ingredients:

- 1 cup steel-cut oats
- 3 cups water
- 1 cup milk of choice (unsweetened)
- 2 large Honeycrisp or Fuji apples, peeled and diced
- 2 tablespoons ground flaxseeds or chia seeds (for added fiber, protein and texture)
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1/8 teaspoon salt

Instructions:

1. Lightly grease the inside of the slow cooker.
2. Add the oats, water, milk, diced apples, flaxseeds or chia seeds, cinnamon, vanilla and salt. Stir well.
3. Cook on low for 7-8 hours (ideal for overnight) or on high for 3-4 hours.
4. Finish. Stir before serving. If the oatmeal is too thick, add a little extra milk. Top with berries and nuts for crunch, brightness and added nutrients.



5.

Balance the plate. Rather than trying to completely skip favorite foods like chicken nuggets, pizza or macaroni and cheese, balance the plate with a fruit and vegetable. For example, by offering a salad or carrot sticks with ranch or hummus before dinner, a child can begin to fill up on fiber which is important for gut health, digestion and feeling satisfied.

6.

Swap out sugary drinks for water and sugar-free drinks, most of the time. Making drinks with sparkling water, a squeeze of lemon and a splash of fruit juice can be a fun way to offer a lower-sugar option.

7.

Plan ahead for vacation. Vacations can be an especially tricky time when it comes to eating healthy foods, but it can be worth the extra effort to keep healthy snacks on hand to avoid hungry kids (and parents). When shopping for sunblock or any other necessities on vacation, grab healthy snacks like nuts, baby carrots, clementines, dried fruits and unsweetened applesauce. Or, use grocery pickup or delivery, if available.

8.

Teach kids to look at nutrition labels when choosing snacks. Most ultraprocessed foods come in “crinkly” packaging with a nutrition label on the back. Teach kids to look at nutrition labels to learn what they are eating. Key facts to check out include: How much added sugar is in the package? (Try to minimize.) Is there any fiber? (Choose products that contain some.) Look at the ingredient list. (Can you pronounce the words? Have you heard of the ingredients?)

9.

Model moderation. Parents are powerful role models for kids and teens at every age. Take small steps every day to move in the direction of healthier eating and modeling a healthy relationship with food. Eating perfectly is not the goal. Rather, aim to take steps to fit more nutrient-dense foods into the day and allow for the other foods to fit sometimes, without shame or guilt.

10.

Eat together. Sharing family meals at least three times per week is linked with better nutrition and physical and mental health. Kids who eat with their families tend to eat more fruits and vegetables and fewer sugary drinks and highly processed snack foods. Plan ahead to make time to eat together as often as possible.

About the Authors:

Natalie D. Muth, MD, MPH, MBA, RDN, FAAP, FACS, DABOM, is a board-certified pediatrician, obesity medicine specialist and registered dietitian nutritionist based in San Diego. She is the co-founder and CEO of Namio Health, a virtual family healthy lifestyle program, and cares for adolescent and young adult patients through her telehealth obesity medicine practice. She is also the proud mother of two teenagers and enjoys taking long walks.

Cassandra Padgett, MS, is a certified health coach, personal trainer and co-founder of Namio Health. She is passionate about helping adolescents build sustainable lifestyle habits, with a focus on developing a healthy relationship with food, physical activity and overall well-being. She is also the proud mother of three children.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](https://obesityaction.org/join)

info@obesityaction.org

(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838



@ObesityActionCoalition

@ObesityAction