



Nutrition Matters

Helping Children to Be Active, Eat Well and Accept their Bodies

Being active, eating well and feeling good about your body are key to children's health and well being. Parents and caregivers can help children develop healthy thoughts and behaviours that will last a lifetime.

What's happening today?

- More than half of 5–17-year-olds do not do enough physical activity for healthy growth and development.
- A study of Canadian children aged 6-12 found that only one in five children eat five or more servings of vegetables and fruit daily.
- Children as early as Grade 3 may begin to feel unhappy with their bodies, think about being thinner and may try to lose weight.

Why is this happening?

- Using cars, computers and TV results in less time being active, walking and playing.
- Larger portion sizes and easy access to fast foods, cause unhealthy eating and eating more food than the body needs.
- The media sends the message that a large body shape is not acceptable. Seeing pictures in magazines and on television of thin women and muscular men can cause children to try to look the same way.

What can we do?

Be a role model and focus on the positive behaviours that promote health – being active, eating well and being yourself. Parents and caregivers

influence their children's lives and are powerful role models. When children see adults enjoying physical activity, eating well and being themselves, they learn from and copy these positive behaviours. By giving children positive messages, adults help children learn the benefits of taking care of themselves through healthy habits.



Be Active

Children need about 90 minutes of physical activity every day.

- **Plan to make physical activity part of each day.** Active parents have active children.
- **Plan active time with your children.** After a meal, go for a walk, throw a ball or play tag. Instead of just watching your children play, join in.
- **Increase the time your children spend on physical activity starting with at least 30 minutes more per day.** Encourage children to walk to school or to a friend's house more often.
- **Reduce "non-active" time starting with at least**

30 minutes less per day. Set limits on the amount of time your children spend watching TV and playing computer games.

- **Help children find fun things to do.**

Plan active outings with family, friends and neighbours. Plan celebrations and vacations around movement and play, such as bowling and swimming.

- **Encourage children to go outside to play.**

If safety is an issue, arrange for an adult to watch them.

- **Help children participate in a variety of physical activities.**

Running and jumping for endurance, stretching and bending for flexibility and climbing or swinging for strength.

- **Allow children to experience different activities.**

They will find things they enjoy doing that make them feel good about themselves. Some children enjoy team sports while others prefer individual activities.

- **Build regular physical activity into your day.**

Take the stairs, walk children to school or get off the bus one stop earlier and walk the rest of the way.

Eat Well

Healthy eating means enjoying eating, eating when hungry and using *Canada's Food Guide* to help you choose which foods and how much to eat. To help children eat well:

- **Make meal and snack times pleasant.**

When possible, eat meals and snacks together as a family. Children who sit down with others regularly for meals are more likely to eat healthier, learn table manners and develop stronger

relationships. Allow enough time for children to eat and encourage them to eat slowly. Reduce distractions by turning off the TV in order to focus on food, family and friends.

Make meal times a pleasant time for talking as a family. While sitting together, avoid talking about difficult issues that can make mealtime stressful – plan another time to discuss them.

- **Try new foods.** Introduce children to new foods along with familiar foods. Encourage children to try new foods without forcing them. It can take many attempts before some children will taste and enjoy a new food. Include foods that aren't your

favourites. Children may like peas even if you don't. Try introducing everyone to a new food each month. Children pick up messages about how you view food. If you are excited about a new food, children may be too.

- **Involve children in the planning, shopping, preparing and serving of meals.** Children have fun, develop cooking skills and are more likely to eat the food offered. Sit down with them and plan meals and snacks for the next week. Ask them about their favourite foods and use them in the meal plan. Allow children to look through

cookbooks and choose recipes they would like to try. Take children shopping, teach them to read labels and let them select

fresh vegetables and fruit for snacks. With supervision, all children can help with meal preparation. A 6-year-old can scrub and wash vegetables, an 8-year-old can measure ingredients and set the table, a 10-year-old can prepare simple recipes and a 12-year-old can use a knife.



- **Eat and enjoy a variety of foods from each of the four food groups every day.** The foods from *Canada's Food Guide* are the “everyday foods” that provide growing children with the nutrients their bodies need to grow and stay healthy. Less healthy choices such as soft drinks, chocolate bars and potato chips are “sometimes foods” that are low in nutrients. Set limits, to make sure that those “sometimes foods” do not replace foods from the four food groups at either meals or snacks.
- **Serve water more often and limit fruit juice to one cup (250 mL) daily.** Limit drinks with caffeine and/or added sugars (tea, coffee, soft drinks, fruit drinks and sport drinks). Energy drinks are not recommended for children.
- **Begin every day with a healthy breakfast.** Include food from at least three of the four food groups.
- **Eat more vegetables and fruit.** Add colour into each meal by offering a variety of brightly-coloured vegetables and fruit. Try serving raw veggies at dinner – kids often like them better than cooked vegetables. Fill a bowl with fruit and put it where children can easily reach it.
- **Accept that adults are responsible for what, when and where children eat.** Adults are responsible for providing children with a variety of nutritious foods to choose from, regular times to eat, and a safe and relaxing place to eat.
- **Listen to your body and allow children to do the same.** When children are healthy and active,



adults need to trust that children know when they are hungry, when they are full, and how much to eat. Children should stop eating when they feel full, even if they have not finished everything on their plate. Let children choose foods from the healthy choices available at each meal.

- **Avoid using food as a reward or punishment.** If food is used to reward or punish it can change how children view food. Soothe hurt feelings with a hug instead of food.

Accept Yourself

Parents and caregivers affect the way children feel about themselves and their bodies. When children feel good about themselves and their bodies they are more likely to make healthy choices.

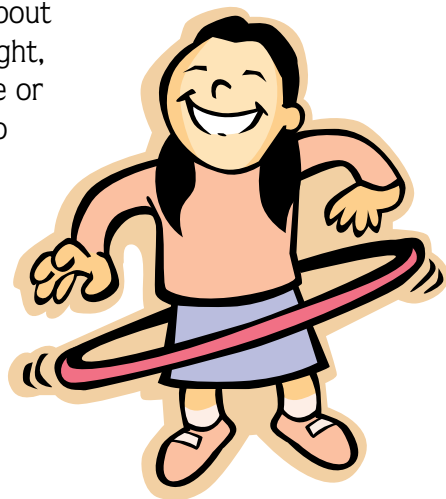
Encourage a healthy body image in children.

- **Genetics play an important role in determining body shape and size.** Help children understand that there are things they cannot control. Ask children to look at other family members to help find out if their bodies are programmed to be tall, short, big, small or in between. Remind children that their bodies are changing and growing, and that weight gain is normal, especially during puberty.

- **Reflect on your own body image and be aware of the messages you send about your body.** Do you emphasize your skills and talents rather than your physical appearance? Be aware that the comments you make about your weight or body parts influence children. When you have a positive view of yourself and your body, the children around you will feel better about themselves.



- **Believe in and promote the message that healthy bodies come in many heights, weights, shapes and sizes.** Avoid making comments about people based on weight, shape, size, race, age or gender. Children who learn to accept diversity are better able to love their own bodies and themselves.



- **Teach children that weight and shape teasing is unacceptable and hurtful.** If you hear children calling someone “fat” or “skinny”, do not ignore it. Let children know that everyone is unique and that all body shapes and sizes have beauty and value. Talk to children about respect and standing up for others.

- **Accept children for who they are.** Tell them they are special and important. When adults feel positive about children, these children will feel good about themselves. Praise children for the things they do, like the way they treat others, rather than for the way they look. Encourage children to focus on their abilities, not their appearance. Help them to identify their strengths.

- **Encourage children to be critical of the images and messages on TV, in magazines and on music videos.** Explain how the media uses unrealistic images to sell products. Talk with them about what they see and hear. By helping children identify unhealthy images, they develop a more realistic picture of the healthy range of body shapes and sizes.



It's Worth It!

Try your best to show children that being physically active, eating well and accepting yourself are important. By taking small steps now, you can help children establish attitudes and behaviours that can make them healthier and last a lifetime!

For more information:

1. Toronto Public Health: www.toronto.ca/health
2. *Canada's Physical Activity Guides for Children and Youth*
www.hcsc.gc.ca/hppb/paguide/
3. For *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide*
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide
4. Satter, E. (1999). *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*. Madison, Wisconsin: Kelcy Press.
5. To find out more about media literacy:
www.media-awareness.ca
6. Dietitians of Canada: www.dietitians.ca
7. Eat Right Ontario: www.eatrightontario.ca

For more information please call Toronto Health Connection at 416-338-7600 to speak with a Dietitian.
For additional issues of Nutrition Matters, refer to publications on our Web site at www.toronto.ca/health.

