

Realistic portions and eating habits for children

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

When feeding children, it's important to remember that their stomach capacity is significantly less than an adult's. Until about age 10 your child's stomach is approximately the size of their fist, though it is elastic and can stretch to accommodate more food. Something else to remember is that a child will eat when they are hungry, naturally stopping when they feel full. Children are born with an innate ability to consume enough food to provide the energy their body will need to function. At one meal, a child may eat like they don't expect to be fed again for a week and at another time they may eat very little. This is normal and should be accepted.

Like others of my generation, I was a member of the "Clean Your Plate Club." You know, that club where your parents put the food on your plate and you were expected to eat everything on it because, after all, "children were starving in China," – as if cleaning my plate affected those children. Even being raised by a dietitian, we were expected to eat what was set before us (something my mother now regrets). My youngest brother, being the most creative of the four kids, figured out that he could put the food he did not want into a paper napkin and feed it, napkin and all, to the dog. Interestingly, he is the only sibling who has never had to struggle with his weight.

The question becomes how, as parents, do we determine what is too much, too little or just right?

My personal solution was to use smaller plates. I would provide very small portions and let my children know to ask for more if they were still hungry.

And what about "grazing" – snacking throughout the day – is it a good thing or a bad thing? Experts resoundingly agree that



allowing children to graze throughout the day is not a good thing as it reduces their ability to regulate intake. Children instead should have three meals and two snacks per day. It is also not a good practice to deny snacks for not completing a meal, this simply makes the snacks even more desirable.

Much of eating, especially the types of foods children eat, can be developmental. Children who do not have molars will have more trouble eating meats, as molars

are meant for grinding meat to make it easy to swallow. As new foods are introduced into the diet, children are subjected to not only new tastes but new textures, and some are not appealing to the child's palate at their age. Because eating, tastes, and textures are partly developmental, parents

need to be understanding when a child who once loved tomatoes no longer wants to eat them. Likewise, patience is called for when a child decides they only want peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at lunch. This desire for PB & J is likely a phase in their development and next week they will tell you they do not like PB & J.

One of the biggest issues regarding feeding children and teaching them healthy food habits is the use of food as a reward. Often parents



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use food as a reward and doing so encourages bad eating habits and makes the "rewards" even more desirable. It is possible to use other types of rewards to encourage good behavior and compliance. Such as tokens that children can save up to use at the store to buy a toy.

The British website www.ToddlerForum.org is an excellent resource for feeding infants and children. It provides much information on portion sizes and feeding ideas for children. This site features photos of portion sizes for foods to give parents a visual representation of what the plate should look like.

Teaching children good eating habits is important to development and health for life. As adults we need to set a good example by not being afraid to push the plate away with food still on it when we feel full. Remember the fist-sized stomach comparison for children

under 10 and also consider that an adult stomach is approximately 12 inches long and six inches wide at the widest point. Visualize how much food could possibly fit inside this organ without it stretching. It's the continual stretching that enables us to eat more and more without feeling full.

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