

## **Excerpted from Ginsburg KR. “Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings”**

### **7. Eat Well.**

Nutrition is vitally important to children’s physical growth and development, but it must also be seen as part of an overall stress-reduction plan because a healthy body helps us manage stress.

A particularly valuable resource is [MyPyramid.gov](http://MyPyramid.gov), an interactive site that allows children, teens, and adults to plug in their gender, weight, and height, and receive personalized guidance for healthy nutrition balanced with exercise. It has been changed from the food pyramid that many of us were accustomed to in the past. Perhaps most importantly, it now includes steps on the side of the pyramid that represent the crucial balance between exercise and nutrition.

But before we look for external sources, I would like to repeat that parents’ modeling is more important than any words they say or resources they guide their children to use. If parents drink cases of soda but tell their children it’s forbidden or only an occasional treat, soda will quickly acquire a special allure. Keep in mind, we parents buy the food and model eating habits.

### ***Some General Guidelines***

- Treat soda and other sugary drinks for what they are—candy water. Sodas should either be highly restricted or drunk only occasionally. Soda can be harmful to tooth enamel. When children drink a lot of soda, they tend to drink fewer nutritious beverages like milk. Even many juice drinks are packed with high fructose corn syrup, so they are not as nutritious as the term *fruit drink* might imply.
  - Make sure children drink lots of water. Water is a healthy drink that gives the body exactly what it needs without all those empty calories. If kids find water boring, give it to them in a cool sports bottle. Show them how to flavor water to give it a twist, by a squirt of lemon juice for example, but without added calories.
  - Offer lots of milk and dairy products or high-calcium beverages like soy milk if your children are intolerant of milk. Some brands of almond and rice milks are also enriched with calcium. Generally, children younger than 2 years should drink whole milk from the time they stop breastfeeding or using formula. But new AAP recommendations state that children at risk of being overweight or with a family history of heart disease, obesity, or high cholesterol, can switch to low-fat milk between 12 months and 2 years old. After 2 years of age, all children should drink reduced-fat milk.
  - Make plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables available. Put out bowls of fruit or cut-up vegetables as snacks. Recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables—8 or 9 servings a day—may seem

nearly impossible, but numerous studies extol their nutritional benefits. Many kids reject certain fruits and vegetables; try to experiment until you find some they like. Just because they reject steamed broccoli one day doesn't mean they won't like munching on raw broccoli dipped in yogurt next week. Keep reintroducing these foods while also offering new varieties.

- Avoid linking food to punishments (“If you don't finish your spinach, you can't go out and play.”) and don't use snacks and desserts as bribes or rewards (“You've been so good, you deserve a bag of chips.”).

- If you want to be certain that children get adequate vitamins and minerals, be sure they eat lots of different-colored fruits and vegetables that supply a healthy variety of nutrients.

- If you want kids to maintain an even-keeled temperament, and therefore be better prepared to manage stress, teach them how to have a *steady* supply of energy. This means avoiding foods that cause quick peaks and crashes of energy to the brain. A little background: Glucose is the source of energy to the brain. It is found in both simple and complex sugars (carbohydrates). Simple sugars are those that taste sweet and are found in candy and soft drinks. They get quickly absorbed and deliver a burst of energy, but then are followed by a crash. Complex carbohydrates don't taste as sweet and deliver a slower, more steady supply of energy to the brain.

Complex carbohydrates are found in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

- Help your children distinguish between healthy and non-healthy snacks. I simplify this idea for my patients by asking them to imagine 2 kinds of snacks, *soap* and *no-soap* snacks that they eat only with their hands. After eating those snacks, do they need soap to wash their hands or just water? This is an easy way for kids to recognize greasy foods that are less healthy than most alternatives.

- Snacking is an important part of childhood. Children are growing and burn a lot of energy. They're hungry after school. They may need a snack while studying at night. They're hungry and thirsty after playing vigorously. Don't eliminate snacking entirely. Instead, provide a variety of healthy snacks. Everyone knows that fruits and vegetables are the healthiest snacks, but many people don't realize that there are large differences among all the salty, crunchy snack foods available today. The greasier they are, the less healthy they are. Some examples are included in the Table below.

***Snacking Can Be Healthy!*** □ □ □ **Unhealthy Soap Snacks** □ **Healthier No-soap Snacks** □ **Healthy Snacks** □ □

Potato chips

Corn chips

Cheese puffs

Buttered popcorn □ Pretzels

Salted unbuttered popcorn

Baked crackers □ Fruits

Vegetables

Low-fat yogurt

Unbuttered popcorn with fat-free spices □ □ *Why Do You Eat?*

A major difference between people who eat healthily and those who don't is found in their answers to the question, "Why do you eat?" Healthy eaters tend to eat when they are hungry. Unhealthy eaters often eat when they are hungry *and* when they are sad, excited, or bored. Sometimes they eat without thinking, just to give themselves something to do while they are watching television.

Try to make mealtime an event that your family enjoys together in the kitchen or dining room and not in the family or recreation room. As difficult as it seems, I suggest that you ban junk food snacks from the room where you watch television, but munching fruits and vegetables, or even spiced air popped popcorn, is okay.

### ***How Much?***

We live in a super-size-me nation. The 4-oz hamburgers that our mothers made a generation ago have morphed into 8-oz patties or larger. A small size ice cream cone is now 2 or 3 scoops. And popcorn and soda at the movies? Medium sizes are enough to stuff an elephant and float an aircraft carrier.

Portion size does matter. Several studies show that portion size is the most significant factor in weight control. Most people eat what is in front of them. If the all-you-can-eat buffet table overflows with tempting foods, we load our plates and go back for more, not because we're still hungry, but

because the food is within view. The more we see, the more we eat.

Parents can dish out reasonably sized portions on each child's plate or place bowls and platters on the table for family members to serve themselves. Don't offer second helpings unless children say they're still hungry. It takes about 20 minutes for the body to register whether it is satisfied or still hungry, so encourage your family to eat slowly. And having a relaxed conversation during meals will slow their pace.

Parents should also control children's portions when eating out. Give them a choice between one item or another, but not both. They can share a tub of popcorn or cut a pizza into smaller slices.

### ***No Fighting Over Food***

Don't make food a battleground. Model good nutrition yourself, and make sure your child has healthy foods to select, but don't take away the pleasure of eating. Mealtime is a great opportunity to enhance family connection and check in with your child. The atmosphere should be relaxed. But if you turn "Eat all your rice" into a battleground command, tensions rise and your child may turn food against you and refuse to eat the foods you offer.

When we talk with children about good nutrition and healthy bodies, we should be careful not to send the wrong messages. This isn't about how kids *look*. So many destructive media messages exist about what we should look like. Men are supposed to have six-pack abs and women should be skinny. Please be careful not to encourage those images. Never tell children that they

don't look right. If they eat well and get regular exercise through play or sports, they will be fine. Be cautious, too, of the overuse of BMI (Body Mass Index). It is a useful tool that is more accurate than simply weight and height, but never forget to look at your child and consider her body type. For example, a girl may have a high BMI, even though she is in excellent shape, because her muscles weigh more than fat. Use BMI as a screening tool, not a label.

If you think your child is overweight or obese, yet you're modeling healthy eating habits and providing good food choices at home, let a health professional counsel your child. When food becomes a battleground within families, not only does it add extra stress, but serious consequences may result during adolescence if teens choose to control their anxieties—or you—by limiting what they eat or by overeating.

### ***Meals as a Bonding Time***

A significant amount of research demonstrates that family meals are highly protective for young people. It's not about food on the plate; it's much more about the connection that occurs when families spend time together. An added benefit of these meals is that healthy family time becomes associated with nutritious leisurely meals. When people take time to eat and associate it with pleasant times, they may be more likely to develop lifelong healthy eating habits.

