

## Positive Food Messages can Positively Impact Eating Habits

By: Donna L. Hollinger

It's National Nutrition Month<sup>®</sup>, what messages are you sending to your children?

Do any of these sound familiar? "Finish your green beans, then you can go." "If you're good at the store, I'll buy you a treat." "Stop crying; let's get some ice cream, it will make you feel better."

The messages we give to our children have a powerful role in shaping their relationship with food. Our words have long-term consequences regarding how our children learn to think about food and can either positively or negatively impact eating habits.

To help children develop a positive relationship with food, consider the following based on a review by authors Jennifer Savage, Jennifer Fisher and Leann Birch.

**Give up control.** Resist the natural tendency to control the amount of food children eat - either by restricting "unhealthy" foods (e.g. no you can't have another cookie – one is enough) and/or pressuring children to eat "healthy" foods (e.g. eat your peas, they're good for you). Restriction tends to make "forbidden foods" more desirable leading to overeating when the "forbidden foods" become available. On the other hand, pressuring children to eat "healthy" foods can result in power struggles and lead to dislike of those foods.

**Provide choice.** One way to give children choices while assuring healthful food is to practice a division of feeding responsibility. This is conceptualized by Ellyn Satter in her book *Child of Mine, Feeding with Love and Good Sense* as "you provide, they decide." Parents are responsible for choosing what foods to offer their children as well as when and where to offer them. Children are responsible for deciding which, if any, foods to eat and how much of them. In practice, this might look like:

- We have string cheese, apples with peanut butter or popcorn for a snack; what would you like?
- If you want some roasted potatoes, I'll hold the bowl so you can serve yourself.

**Reward and comfort without using food.** Since sweets tend to be the choice for rewards, this habit can foster a preference for these foods. Using food for comfort ignores dealing with the cause of the upset. It also encourages eating when not hungry which can lead to overeating. Find non-food ways to reward or comfort. For example, reading a favorite book, playing a game or going to the park together.

**Help children recognize feelings of hunger and fullness.** Allow them to stop eating when satisfied rather than when their plate is clean. To assist children in developing this self-awareness, consider words like:

- Is your stomach still hungry or has it had enough?
- Are you full or do you want more?

**Encourage exploration.** Stimulate children's curiosity by focusing on different attributes of a food. Try comments like:

- This is string cheese. How many strings can you make?
- Edamame are fun. See how you can pop them right from their pod into your mouth.

**Support self-efficacy.** Build children's confidence to make their own food choices.

Ways might include asking children:

- What kind of fruit sounds good for lunch?
- Would you like to help me make banana bread this afternoon?
- What shall we put in our salad tonight?

Celebrate National Nutrition Month<sup>®</sup> by helping children develop a positive relationship with food.

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