

THE HUMAN BODY IS A WONDERFUL REFINERY. Feed it nutritious food, and it transforms that food into energy. "Food as fuel" is an important concept to help children develop healthy eating habits. One of the most critical steps in promoting those habits is learning to discern true hunger from the feelings caused by boredom, emotions or habit.

Kelly Muzyczka, a mother of three from Pittsburgh, Pa., believes it is vital to teach children what true hunger is and not to eat out of habit or for social reasons. "It's very important that children are encouraged to respect what their bodies tell them," she says. "The weirdest thing I ever heard was someone saying, 'You should have a snack soon because if you don't eat now, you won't be allowed to eat until dinner.' What does that teach a child? [That] when you eat is more important than when your body is hungry. It makes no sense to me."

Linda Kazakis from Greenville, S.C., is in tune with how and when her children eat. She believes it is important to teach children why they get hungry in the first place. "Teach them from the get-go what food is for and what it is not for," she says. "You eat to live and you eat as healthy as you can to feel the best you can."

FEELING THE CUES

Peggy O'Shea is a Boston, Mass.-based registered dietitian and member of the Massachusetts Dietetic Association board of directors. She says teaching children to know how hungry feels is crucial to their future health but maintains that children have an innate knowledge of their own needs. It is our job as parents to reinforce those appetite cues to maintain a healthy balance.

"If a child says they are hungry just after breakfast and is told they

'just ate' or that they must 'wait until lunchtime,' they may begin to ignore the normal hunger cues and instead recognize eating in relation to time of day or associate eating with certain activities," says O'Shea. "Instead, consider offering a small, healthy snack – if they are hungry they will eat it. This will help to ensure that the body isn't retrained to focus on external cues rather than true hunger needs."

O'Shea says that while children generally know when and when not

to eat based on their hunger, they may not know exactly what to eat. That's our job. Parents also need to be aware of the many external food cues that affect children from a very early age. O'Shea says parents should monitor what types of foods kids request and the activities they were doing when the request came in. For example, children often want what they see on TV and may request a certain snack they just saw. This can create cues the child isn't even aware of. ▶

4 tummy-taming snack ideas

"A GOOD SNACK IS ONE THAT IS NUTRIENT DENSE, so each and every bite contributes to a child's intake of healthy foods," says Peggy O'Shea, a Boston, Mass.-based registered dietitian and member of the Massachusetts Dietetic Association board of directors. "You can begin involving your child in healthy food planning by offering a variety of nutritious options and letting them choose. Involving kids in preparation of foods makes them more interested and excited about eating them."



While you can't go wrong with a simple piece of fresh fruit, here are some additional creative and healthy suggestions:

- 1 Cracker sandwiches:** Layer whole-grain or graham crackers with natural peanut butter and sliced bananas or apples.
- 2 Yogurt "sundaes":** Top low-fat yogurt with fruit and crunchy whole-grain cereal.
- 3 Dried fruits and nuts:** Raisins and peanuts are great, but try adding a little variety with soy nuts, dried cranberries, dried blueberries, dried apple rings or dried carrots. The combinations are endless, and this snack travels well.
- 4 Fruit smoothies:** Blend together a banana, skim milk and a few frozen strawberries for a refreshing treat. Feel free to substitute your favorite fruits for new flavor options.

EATING FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

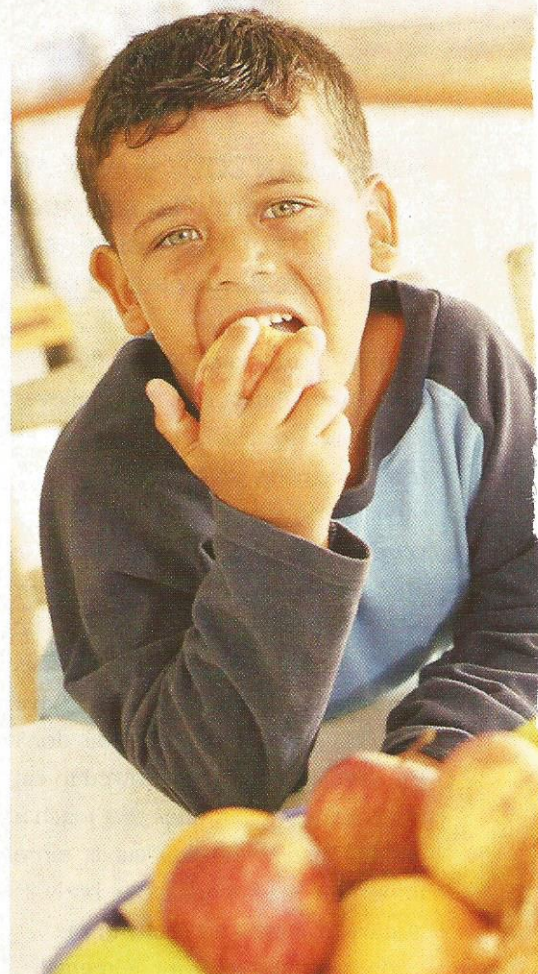
It's important to have a few healthy food options available to offer to children when they say they are hungry. "A child who truly is hungry will eat," says O'Shea. "One who is bored or having an emotional response may pass it up or request a different food. Requesting candy or cookies may be a good indication of emotional hunger."

Because children learn many of their eating habits from their parents, one of the most critical ways parents can teach their children good habits is to avoid snacking for the wrong reasons themselves.

O'Shea suggests that parents help children separate food from activities by passing time in other ways besides eating. For instance, if you have to pass some time while your car is being serviced, don't go to the vending machine for a snack. Instead, take a walk, play a game or undertake some other activity.

Avoid giving food as a reward or for comfort. A hug and a kiss after a child hurts himself are preferable to a piece of cake. Offering children cookies and milk if they do their chores quickly will only teach them that food is a reward for good behavior.

"When hunger does occur, offer healthy snacks [such as] fruits, vegetables and whole grains," says O'Shea. "Offering cookies, chips, candy, etc., may ultimately lead to more reports of 'hunger' if that is the usual snack provided."



pharmacist feedback

ANSWERS TO YOUR VITAMIN QUESTIONS by Alesia Hanson, R.Ph.

Q: Why are vitamin supplements important for children?

A: Vitamins are important for children because most kids do not eat a perfectly balanced diet. Vitamin supplements ensure children absorb essential nutrients they may not get in their diets.

Q: At what age can a child start taking adult vitamins?

A: At age 4, the average child has the same vitamin and mineral requirements as most adults and could take an adult vitamin if he/she could swallow a tablet. Most children prefer chewable vitamins until they are older simply because they are easier to take.

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DRINK VS. SNACK

Patricia Rose, a pediatric certified specialist dietitian at Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland, Ore., says parents should watch out for thirst cues. "Hunger is often mistaken for thirst," she says. "The best thirst quencher is water. Avoid calorie-containing drinks like juices or sweetened drinks for hydration."

If you think your child may be thirsty instead of hungry, offer him a glass of water instead, and send him off to play. If he comes back with another request for food, he is probably truly hungry.

Most nutritionists advocate offering children meals or snacks on a regular schedule, but parents should let children make the decision themselves about how much they eat. This will help them be in tune with their own body's nutritional needs and promote a lifetime of healthy eating habits. ☀



Children seem prone to stomachaches – some caused by hunger, some not. *Family Energy* Expert Dr. Aneema Van Groenou shares advice on how to handle tummy troubles. www.toddlerstoday.com/resources/articles/tummytroubles.htm