

Food for Thought

Nutrition is a Parenting Responsibility

Dr. Margaret MacKrell Gaglione

In last month's column, we discussed the importance of making changes in our dietary habits in daily blocks rather than giving up the ship after one bad day. I challenged you to pick one dietary obstacle and to work on improving that habit in 24 hour blocks. This month, the challenge is for us parents and grandparents to extend our love for our children to their nutrition. As parents we strive to protect our children and keep them safe and healthy. Often times, this is at the expense of their immediate contentment. We have all battled a screaming and kicking toddler that does not want to be in a car seat. As our children grow, the battles turn from tantrums to verbal persuasion as our children try to get us to focus on their happiness and instant gratification rather than their long term health and safety.

Every time we feed our children we have an opportunity to prevent diabetes and cancer. Conversely every time we allow our children to have sodas, fast food, fried food, high calorie snacks or when we allow them to develop poor eating habits, we increase the likelihood that our children will be obese, and in turn place them at risk for developing type 2 diabetes and cancer. Obesity is the number one health crisis facing our children.

I often have my adult patients tell me that they eat fast food because their children want it. Most parents would agree that it is irresponsible to not put a child in a car seat while driving. Parents that insist that their children will only eat chicken fingers or cheeseburgers fail to recognize that this is because they have allowed their child to eat only chicken fingers and cheeseburgers rather than put up with the “kicking and screaming”. Hungry children will eat good food and will try new foods when this is what’s available to them.

This is not to say that this is not a difficult task. Providing our children with good nutrition in an environment that pushes the opposite is an uphill battle. It can be done however if we change the paradigm and view nutrition as the most important health and safety issue for our children. We must view our children’s nutrition (and our teens’ nutrition) as an extension of our love and parenting for them.

There are a few simple changes that will have a dramatic impact on your child’s eating habits. Start with saying no to fast food restaurants and regular soda. Once you have conquered the soda and fast food, ensure that they eat breakfast every day. Start adding multiple servings of fruit and vegetables every day. Just by having fruits and vegetables readily available, children will eat more of them.

Then focus on the behaviors associated with eating. Insist on three meals per day, only eat food at the kitchen table, and don’t use food as a pacifier or a

reward. If you reward your children with non food items, they will learn not to reward themselves with food as an adult.

Instituting these changes will come with lots of kicking and screaming. It will not be easy. As all good and engaged parents know, parenting is the hardest job.

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