

Food For Thought



One evening a few years back, my family was sitting at the table getting ready to eat dinner when I asked my daughter what piece of the rotisserie chicken she wanted. I figured she'd want a leg, but instead she politely asked for a "nugget." After the laughter subsided, my husband and I explained to her that "chickens don't actually have nuggets."

Until recently, I had long since forgotten about the "chickens don't have nuggets" lesson. Then, the other day, I was reminded of it while watching a few seconds of a TV program in which a classroom of kids couldn't tell the difference between a tomato and a potato. While unfortunate, it is likely that those same kids would likely be at a loss if someone asked them what a French fry was made out of.

The inability to identify a potato points to the larger and growing problem of childhood obesity. Along with the soaring waistlines of our children come "grown-up" problems like high blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol. We are learning the hard way that our bodies were not made to eat packaged and processed foods; yet, those are most often the cheapest and easiest option for time-starved families.

There's no doubt we live in a fast-paced world of convenience foods that we all indulge in—some more than others. There's no going back to a simpler time without them, so as parents it's our responsibility to ensure our kids know where food comes from, what it is made out of and how it affects how we look and feel. It's one of those things where parents really have to practice what we preach and teach by example.

Junk food is one thing my husband and I are fairly strict about. My kids know that candy, cookies, ice cream, soda and desserts in general are only for special occasions. They are treats—not something you eat every day. This has created a few battles over the years because they often come home from school, church and friends' homes with candy. Most of it goes into a big bowl in the pantry

that I get rid of every few months at work. The kids get to pick a few of their favorites before I give it all away. While my children think my husband and I are being mean, in reality we are laying down the law because we love them, and want them to be healthy and happy.

While it's easy to think the teaching process ends with the "don'ts," the most important lessons come from the "dos," or what we should eat. One of the best ways to teach our kids about food, the "real kind" that comes from the dirt, is to let them plant a few seeds and watch them grow.

As a child I remember planting our massive family garden every Mother's Day after the last frost. All spring, my siblings and I were put to work, pulling the weeds. By summer, the fun would start as we reaped the benefits of our hard work. At dinner time, my mother would send us to the garden to pick corn on the cob, green beans and tomatoes for the salad, or a little zucchini for the stir fry.

To this day I can't eat a tomato from the grocery store without thinking about how much different it tastes from the ones you grow in your own back yard—vine ripened and grown without pesticides and a haul across country on a truck. Real food, the kind you grow, really does taste better. Furthermore, some of my fondest childhood memories are of picking berries in my grandmother's back yard and climbing up her massive apple tree to pick enough fruit for applesauce. She showed me how to make jams, can my own food and make bread from hand-ground wheat.



I miss having a garden for my own children and the lessons it provides. Our current home only has space for a few herbs and tomatoes. A few years ago in Utah, we had a massive garden that my daughter loved—she was delighted by the carrots that grew as long as her arm, and the tiny red cherry tomatoes were like candy from the vine. Eating vegetables was fun for her because she'd grown them from seed to tasty treat.

I recognize that we don't all have the time, space or ability to grow a half-acre garden. However, we can all make tiny changes by taking our kids to the grocery store, showing them what there is and helping them make healthy food choices.

Here are a few fun ways to teach kids about healthy eating—they won't even realize they're learning.

- 1 Get up early on a Saturday morning and hit up your local farmers market as a family.
- 2 Make family meal time a must. Choose one meal that is mandatory for everyone to attend; then, sit down together and enjoy each other's company. Once the healthy meal has been prepared, don't give in and make different meals for the kids.
- 3 Take your kids to the grocery store. Let them pick out a new vegetable each week and then help them find a recipe in which that piece of produce is used.
- 4 Find a local u-pick farm where you can let your kids pick their own strawberries or vegetables.
- 5 Plant a patio or windowsill garden with a few herbs. Let the kids water the plants and watch them grow, then make sure you use them. Basil is great for Italian dishes, and you can use cilantro to make fresh salsa.
- 6 Find ways to make old family favorites like pizza a little healthier with homemade whole-grain crusts and lots of veggies. Let the kids help knead the dough and load on the healthy toppings.

It's like Mom used to say: "You are what you eat." Summer is a perfect time to make healthy eating fun for the family. In fact, I'm getting hungry just thinking about it!



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