Three Tips for Feeding Kids during COVID-19

Many of our routines and structures have been turned upside down. The one thing that continues to be essential is that we still need to eat! By seeking ways to connect with food and take the pressure off ourselves and our kids, we create opportunities to reduce stress and nurture healthy eating. Perhaps there’s something in here you’d like to try. If not, that’s OK too. We all need different things to help us cope.

1) YOU provide the routine structure of sit down meals and snacks
Aiming to provide food at regular times can help children feel safe and secure by providing some structure during these changing times. We can support healthy eating for ourselves and kids when we build a predictable routine of regular meals and snacks even without a daycare, preschool, or school routine.

YOU provide, THEY decide
One of the experts in how we eat and feed, Ellyn Satter, encourages this approach to build structure around food — YOU provide and THEY decide:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Child</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What food to offer</td>
<td>Whether to eat</td>
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<tr>
<td>When to offer food</td>
<td>How much to eat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where to offer food</td>
<td>Grow as nature intended</td>
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Creating structure isn’t always easy and it can take time to figure out what is best for your family. It may help to have more planned snacks than usual right now. The key is to keep timing relatively consistent. If this is something new, consider finding ways to make it special. Homemade paper placemats may not last long but can be a great activity for kids. What to do in between breakfast, lunch, dinner, and planned snacks? Offer kids the choice of water or waiting until the next meal or snack.

THEY decide whether and how much to eat from what you offer
Allowing children to decide whether and how much to eat of the foods offered can support positive, lower stress mealtimes, and in the long run, build healthier eaters. Including foods that our kids will usually eat at meals and snacks can help them feel confident that they can fill themselves up and ward off hunger later. Consider meals that offer some “build your own” options such as a grain-bowl buffet at dinner or an oatmeal buffet at breakfast. Tacos and pizza are other options where children can learn to enjoy a greater variety of foods through a diversity of toppings or fillings. Kids generally get what they need over time to grow as nature intended. Once you’ve got it on the table, YOU have provided, and now THEY decide whether and how much to eat from the foods that are offered.
2) Get kids involved
There’s no reason kids can’t have a say in the menu before it gets on the table. You don’t have to take their request but who knows, they may provide some inspiration! It can be surprising how young children and even teenagers can get excited to help out with food planning and cooking when invited. Check out these 10 tips to get your kids in the kitchen or these ideas for getting your family inspired in the kitchen together. Whatever your skill level, there are ideas for every stage from toddlers to teens. From what’s available, aim to include some foods that you enjoy eating as a family. This is also a great opportunity to practice proper hand-hygiene.

Food can be an opportunity to bring family together as we’re physically distant from others. Looking for meal ideas? Check out the BC community recipes on BetterTogetherBC, submit your own recipe to the site, or even create your own cookbook! Want some inspiration? Here are a few 3-minute videos from Better Together worth checking out: Murphy Family Snack caterpillar, Omelettes with the Mennells, Single blackberry muffins.

3) All foods can fit
All foods can fit into a healthy pattern of eating. And that becomes especially important when feeding kids during COVID-19, as anxiety and stress are often already elevated. If you enjoy foods like cookies and other sweets, it’s a good idea to include them in the rotation of foods offered to kids too. When we provide them with some access to sweets, alongside other foods, it takes away the power, and provides them with the opportunity to learn to include them in moderation. As long as we’re providing a variety of foods, from within what is available right now, kids will get what they need over time.

The bottom line
Go easy on yourself. As parents and caregivers, you are doing the best that you can in these uncertain times. What works for one person may be different for someone else. Getting food on the table is only one part of the picture. Look for ways to build connection and enjoyment to help cope with stress. During this time of physical distancing, we wish everyone health and pleasure with eating today and in the long run.

Want more information about food and eating during COVID-19?
Refer to Top Five Questions about Food and Eating for more information about food safety, meal planning, and using food for comfort during COVID-19.

If you have any specific questions about your child’s nutrition, you can contact HealthLinkBC at 8-1-1 to speak to a registered dietitian or email a HealthLinkBC dietitian.

Supportive COVID-19 Family Resources:
- BCPA psychological support for stress and anxiety during COVID-19
- Kelty’s Key: online therapy for age 16+
- Foundry BC mental health support for BC youth age 12-24 and their families
- Caring for Children in COVID-19 crisis

Written by Vancouver Coastal Health Child and Youth Public Health Dietitians, April 28, 2020