

# Four Rules For Parents

I've already talked about the first most common question asked of me by clients and workshop attendees. The second most common question I get asked is always regarding kids. "My kids won't eat good food! What should I do?"

There are four major points I always make when discussing nutrition for kids with caregivers but first and foremost, I tell them that children learn best about food and eating through the examples of their parents. If your relationship with food is skewed, theirs probably will be too. Keep that in mind as you move toward a healthier home.

## Now on to those four major points:

- 1) **Don't bring unhealthy food into the house**
- 2) **Don't be a food drill sergeant**
- 3) **Get kids involved in purchasing decisions and food prep**
- 4) **Don't put limits on consumption of healthy food**

Let me explain what I mean in more detail.

### **Don't Bring it Home**

I am flabbergasted when mothers tell me they can't get their child to eat anything but fruit loops and peanut butter sandwiches on white bread with the crusts cut off. I wonder what would happen to that same child if he were stuck in a house with only whole food choices. My guess is that he wouldn't starve. Recently my son started cutting the crusts off his own sandwiches. I said, "Oh no. You cannot become one of those kids!" He promptly informed me that he always eats the crust and just likes to cut them off and eat them separately. I wonder, though, what would have happened had I allowed that pickiness to get out of hand?

Kids don't create their bad food choices, we do. If you started your child out on the wrong foot nutritionally (doing your best with the information you had at the time of course) you can always change it. The first and most important thing is to not buy "un-real food." Don't bring it into the house. (see that period?) If you want your kids to eat good food, buy good food. If you don't know what good food is, continue reading, you soon will. If your child is hungry and there are only good choices, your child will eventually choose to eat what you've provided.

### **Don't Be a Food Drill Sergeant**

I have heard about (and met) many mothers who won't let their children eat anything that isn't within a strict set of rules and parameters that she's laid out. This kind of anti-intuitive eating is a form of disordered eating, whether we want to admit it or not. I have also been privy to many of these children-cum-adults' tales about how the minute they were out on their own, they overindulged in fast food, junk food, soda and other science lab creations.

When you are fanatical about food (even if it's healthy), your children will be too. Food will become to them something that is not meant to nourish, but is meant to be sneaked, obsessed over, feared, hoarded, or something to be shameful about.

Keep good food in the house, but go out to dinner every once in awhile. Buy a box of candy at the movies. Bring a treat home on special occasions and celebrate and enjoy it together. You will end up teaching your kids to be in control of food rather than letting food control them. You'll teach them to manage (and feed) cravings in a healthy way, and you'll also prompt them to adopt much healthier habits when they leave home.

### **Get Kids Involved in Purchasing Decisions and Food Prep**

Kids love it when they have a say in things that usually fall into the adult domain. My kids enjoy getting to be involved in what we're eating for dinner (and lunch and breakfast!). Sometimes I'll give them a stack of cookbooks and give them the task of picking one or two things they'd like to either prepare themselves or help to prepare for meals. Little kids can look at pictures in a cookbook and choose that way, and older kids can pick the menu, write the grocery list and even prepare the whole meal.

I also love to give my kids food preparation jobs as their daily chores. I needed to make cookies for a fundraiser once and I was too busy so I gave it to my daughter as her chore for the day. She was glad to have a break from regular cleaning chores and had so much fun putting together the recipe and making it into dozens of cookies.

Another thing I love to do is to take my kids to the store, hit the produce section and let them pick whatever they want. Good food becomes so much more exciting with this activity because they literally own whatever they pick. They put it in the cart, they take it home, they put it away (or keep it in their room!) and then they eat it. I had one child pick giant bag of baby carrots and

eat the whole thing on his own. He wouldn't have done that if I had brought home a big bag of baby carrots for the family. He ate them because they were his. He picked them out and he saw it as a privilege rather than a rule.

### **Don't Put Limits on Food**

I love to set bowls of fruit and nuts and carrots on the table. My kids know that they are free for the taking, that they don't have to ask permission, and that they can eat as much as they want whenever they want.

I often buy cases of fruit at the farmer's market: giant boxes of peaches or apples or plums, and when I bring them home, my kids know that it's free reign. They'll sometimes eat and eat and eat, and guess what? They always stop when they've had enough. If I don't mess with their intuition, they govern themselves very well most of the time. That's not to say you can't or shouldn't guide your children, but try having faith in them to make good food choices and see what happens.

We often have treats in our house. Cookies or brownies made with whole food ingredients, coconut ice cream, and whole food chocolate bars to name a few. Another technique that works really well, instead of limiting those foods, is to tell my kids that they can have another cookie or a bowl of ice cream, if they'll eat a fruit or vegetable first. It's a great way to teach kids about balance without associating treats with guilt or negative feelings. Sometimes they won't even crave the treat anymore after they've eaten the fruit or vegetable, which is a helpful way to align cravings with the intuition of what the body really needs.

