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BLOG POST TITLE: Healthy Habits for Healthy Kids

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I was raised by parents who were way ahead of their time. Seriously! Thirty-plus (cough!) years ago, when I was a kid, we ate tofu, granola, homemade yogurt with live cultures that was only served with real honey. Our sugar jar contained only raw sugar. We rarely had pop or red meat. My parents bought East Indian cookbooks and we ate a lot of healthy spicy vegetarian dishes. (Actually, I was SUPPOSED to eat all that stuff; however our family dog lived a suspiciously long and happy life.)

The only times I recall being allowed to have candy were Easter and Christmas. So of course I grew up and adapted these incredibly healthy eating habits for myself.

NOT!

As soon as I was out of the house I lived on Doritos, candy bars, and Mountain Dew for about two years before it finally occurred to me that I didn't actually feel so great. (What can I say, slow learner.)

Now I'm a parent. And with two energetic teenagers in the house, I don't want them to follow in my errant footsteps. So what to do? How do we keep that sugar monster in check and establish healthy habits in our kids? Well, my hubby and I have adopted a few different ways...

Lunch Bunch. From the time my kids started first grade, I've had them pack their own lunches. I'll confess, this began initially because I hated doing it; and they were perfectly capable. Add to that the fact that my daughter was (& still is) the pickiest eater on the planet and voila! Problem solved.

However, there were stipulations. I explained the different food groups providing examples of each from our cupboards and refrigerator. I taught them about common sources of protein like peanut butter, lunchmeat, nuts, boiled eggs, and cheese. They understood they were required to pack two sources of protein, a bread and a fruit for lunch.

Often, instead of a traditional sandwich, my daughter would pack wheat crackers and cheese slices, or peanut butter. Sometimes she'd pack plain bread slices separate from the lunchmeat in two different baggies. (Heaven forbid they should touch each other!)

I keep a variety of fruit available. The kids have developed a clear understanding of healthy food choices, and have gotten very creative about making their meals. The best part is, they can't say "Yuck, I'm not eating that! I can't believe what mom packed me for lunch."

Sweet Suppression. I knew from experience that not being allowed to have sweets, at least in my case, was somewhat detrimental to my nutritional health since I went in the complete opposite direction once I was on my own. So we keep a "treat bowl" with small, snack-size

candy available. The kids they may eat a couple of pieces if they wish *after* eating a healthy lunch.

My daughter is pretty good about this—my son, well, let’s just say he takes after me and I have to keep my eye on him. But at 14 years old, he’s recognizing his weakness and is already learning to control it.

Pop Drop. I still take a lesson from my parents and we don’t keep pop in the house on a regular basis. Sometimes in the summer, for a special treat, I’ll pick some up from the grocery store for family movie or game night. The kids know our consistent rule is “no caffeine.”

Movin’ & Groovin’. I’ve exercised in one form or another since I stopped studying dance at age 17. My kids see this, and have observed my husband workout regularly as well. Because our kids are 14 and 16, and both are involved in sports, we encourage them to set physical fitness goals and exercise, particularly in their off seasons. They both run, do calisthenics and some light weight work. Hopefully, by encouraging this while they’re still young, exercise will become an integral part of their overall development, and a habit they will maintain throughout their lives.

TV Turnoff. Aside from our occasional addictions to seasons of American Idol, and Dancing with the Stars, we don’t typically sit around all night watching television shows. Together as a family we bike, hike, and through showing not telling, we encourage our kids to keep a healthy level of activity. Hopefully this leading by example will be way more effective than merely nagging them to get outside more.

Dinner Winner. With active teens it’s not always possible, but we make it a point to eat meals together as a family whenever we can. A friend of mine gave me a great tip once and I’ve always incorporated it into our family meals. She suggested always offering a fruit, vegetable and bread with every meal. So when my daughter was little, and stuck her nose up at the main course being served, there were still healthy options on the table for her to choose. Of course, now that our kids older and more physical, they eat it all!

Self Serve. When the kids were young, I’d dish up their plates and a lot of food would get wasted. I would unwittingly serve up portions that were much too large for their little tummies. Once we started allowing them to do it, it not only gave them a sense of control, but we wasted a lot less food that way. Plus, they knew best what portions were reasonable for them much better than I did.

Snack Attacks. This is particularly true of teens with their rapidly growing, changing bodies—three meals a day just doesn’t cut it. I keep a container in the cupboard filled with granola bars, packs of crackers, low-fat chips and low-sugar snacks. The kids know these are available to them if they need something to tide them over until the next meal and I know they’re getting something healthier to eat than...oh, I dunno, Doritos, candy bars and Mountain Dew?

Try giving a few of these ideas a whirl with your own kids—and hopefully by establishing healthy habits now, they’ll enjoy healthier lives in the future.