

No Rules, Just a Healthy Routine

Help your kids choose right



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“Oh, no, mum! Not rice and gravy again? Let's order pizza,” my 21 year-old daughter, Serena said to me earlier this week, taking me back to when she was a child and wanted a slice of pizza for dinner, every day of the week! Her gummy bear obsession at age three, her potato chips phase at age five, or the endless diet fads she followed as a teen—I have so many childhood memories of her and my son, mostly associated with their food habits. And of course, I also remember my rising anxiety levels, the constant worry about whether or not I was feeding them enough nutritious, wholesome food. Due to the pandemic, my children are back home after being away for several years, and even now, I can't help but offer them both fruits, salads, nuts, or endless healthy snacking options between meals. And though I do get exasperated reminders from the both of them about them being grown-ups, it hasn't dissuaded me at all from being a mum. Isn't that how it is with us mums? We are always continually striving to ensure that our children, however old they may be, make nutritious food choices. But for mamas with babies, toddlers, and preschoolers, this struggle is a tad tougher with the added pressure of teaching children the correct eating habits that could last a lifetime.

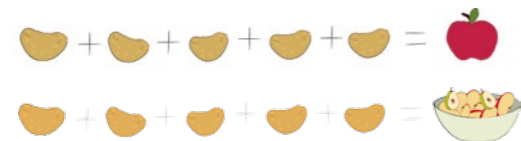


Is my child eating enough? How do I make them eat wholesome food? How do I delete the junk out of their diet? How do I get them to eat their share of fruits and veggies? As a nudge behavioral visual designer and mum of two, I understand those food-related apprehensions. However, nagging your children to eat better or eliminating tasty treats from their diet are all short-term solutions, like a fad diet that may appear beneficial at first but is harmful over an extended period when its effects start to wear off. Scientific research has indicated that restricting a child's diet may be contributing to childhood obesity. By following the 'all or nothing' approach for children in their early years, you could increase the risk of them becoming binge eaters as adults. Working with children and parents from across the globe has shown me the importance of teaching little ones how to eat mindfully. When you teach your child to listen to their body, you teach them how to make smart food choices independently, and this habit follows them into adulthood. Telling, instructing, and nagging does not work beyond the early years and often leaves children confused about making the correct food choices when left to their own devices. So where and how do you begin?

FOR TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS, HERE ARE A FEW EASY-TO-FOLLOW NUDGE IDEAS YOU COULD TRY AT HOME

1. THE FOUR IS TO ONE NUDGE

Give your toddler two bowls—one filled with their favourite treat and the other one with fruit slices or vegetable sticks of their choice. You could also offer a whole fruit like an apple, pear, or banana. After every



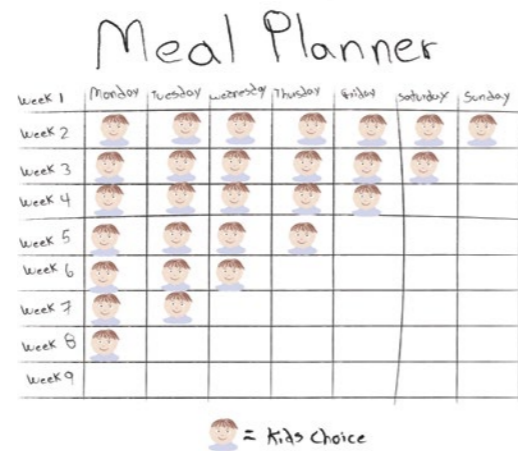
four bites of the treat, suggest that they eat one bite/slice of the fruit or vegetable. This nudge is a subtle yet smart approach to helping your child understand the concept of a balanced diet, and how their body needs various foods, tastes, and nutrients to grow well and stay healthy.

2. THE YUMMY DRAWER

Let your toddler have a drawer filled with their favourite treats and arrange 30 stickers on it—one for each day of the month. You could put your child's favourite cartoon character or themed stickers to make the nudge idea even more exciting. Now tell

your child to pull out a sticker each time they decide to take a treat from the drawer. They could opt to eat one treat a day, two or even three. But let them know that once all 30 stickers have been pulled out it, means the treats for the month are over, and you will refill the drawer with their favourite goodies only when a new month begins. This nudge will eventually teach them to pace out their treats without you having to restrict or nag them to eat less junk.

3. THE MAKE-A-MENU NUDGE



Begin by letting your preschooler decide the food menu for your family for all the seven days of the week. Can you imagine just how excited your little one will be at the thought of getting to decide what mom and dad eat at mealtime? The next week ask them to choose meals for six days of the week and let your spouse choose the menu for the remaining one day. The week after, make it meal choices for five days for your child and two days for your spouse. Continue this pattern until finally, it's time for your spouse to choose their favourite meals for the entire week and let your child learn to adapt to eating this new food menu. This nudge is an effective way to help children, even the fussiest eaters, try a broader range of nutritious food options and flavours. It also teaches your child the concept of eating what is available, instead of expecting exceptional food catered to suit their whims and taste buds each day.

4. THE FIST & FIT NUDGE

Nudge your child to eat a palm-full of veggies, fruits, or nuts every day. Let him/her choose what they want to eat. Now explain to him/her how they are holding a fistful of power, health, and nutrition, and if they consume these nutrients every day, they are eventually



going to be super strong and healthy. You can follow this up with a simple physical ply activity such as kicking the ball or throwing it in the hoop each day. As they get better every day, explain to them how eating healthy has a positive outcome on their stamina, energy, hand-eye coordination, and making them healthier, more active with each passing day.

What's important is that you let your li'l ones savour food and enjoy mealtimes instead of pressuring them to eat what you deem is 'good' or 'healthy' all the time. Labeling foods and restricting children from eating

certain things ups their curiosity and increases their desire to taste this so-called bad food. When your goal is to help them enjoy their food, you will see a gradual transformation in their behavior—one where wholesome, nutritious food won't be an enforced choice for them but an independent one that they will continue to make as they transcend into their pre-teen, teen or adulthood years. **MB**

