

# 3 Ways to Create Healthy Eating Habits with Snacks

*Dina Rose, PhD*



There's no doubt about it: we are a nation of snackers. And while it's tempting to think that our kids are snacking on wholesome foods, the evidence isn't so pretty.

Here are some things every parent needs to know about snacks. Research shows that typically:

**Snacking adds unhealthy foods to the diet.** Most snack calories come from desserts and sweetened beverages, but it won't be long before candy and salty snacks (such as potato chips, tortilla chips and pretzels) dominate the snacking "field."

**Snacking adds unnecessary calories.** Children today typically consume 168 more calories from snacks than they did in 1977. Contrary to popular wisdom, kids don't compensate for snacking by eating smaller meals. Kids between two and six years old have

added 182 calories per day to their diets since 1977, with no corresponding increase in physical activity.

Sounds grim, I know. But here's the good news. You can actually use snacks to teach your kids healthy eating habits. Here are three.

**It's important to build a good appetite before meals.** One reason some children don't eat very well at meals is simple: they're not really hungry. On average, children snack around three times per day. Some kids, though, snack up to 10 times each day! When children snack on demand, those snacks are bound to bump against mealtimes, often occurring just 20 minutes or so before it's time to sit down. What's more, constant snacking teaches children an unintended lesson: Hunger is something to avoid at all costs.

Set a schedule for meals and snacks to eliminate grazing. Then, the next time your children say they're hungry, say, "Good. That means you're building up a good appetite! We'll eat soon." Don't forget to tell your children how long they'll have to wait until the next snack or meal.

**Fruits and vegetables are the go-to snack.** Many parents think of meals as the time when nutritious foods are served. I call this the Nutrition Zone Mentality. But since eating is really a matter of math—kids are more likely to eat the kinds of foods they're exposed to the most frequently—making fruits and vegetables the go-to snack can fundamentally change the way kids eat. Remember, every bite eaten throughout the day (especially the pre-meal snack) takes the pressure off dinner! Here's the bonus: once kids get used to the taste and texture of fruits and vegetables, they are more likely to enjoy other kinds of healthy foods too.

**Snacks are a great time to try new foods.** Most families wait until dinner to offer kids new foods. However, when eating something new is the only thing that stands between children and starvation—or between parents and the time when they're "off duty"—there's a lot of pressure. Parents end up begging, bartering, and cajoling. Kids end up resisting. Snacks are different. Knowing an actual meal is around the corner means parents can relax: no one will starve! And since snacks tend to be small portions, served when kids are hungry, children are more likely to be adventurous.

*Dina Rose, PhD, is the author of [It's Not About the Broccoli: Three Habits to Teach Your Kids for a Lifetime of Healthy Eating](#).*

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