



Helping Youth Make Better Food Choices

Ideas From and For Nutrition, Health and Public Health Professionals Leading the Way

In July-September 2007, **Action for Healthy Kids** conducted a national survey of nutrition, health and public health professionals who work with children and youth. The survey, which generated 1,438 responses, asked respondents to provide vital information and insights regarding:

- > Their personal perspectives on the current nutrition recommendations outlined in the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans'* Food Groups to Encourage.
- > The barriers they have encountered in encouraging kids to make better choices about the foods they eat.
- > Their individual preferences and habits in recommending food groups when helping youth make better food choices.
- > Their perceptions about why youth do not make better food choices — and the greatest potential influencers in changing these conditions.
- > Their own approaches and strategies for helping youth make food choices in keeping with the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

Special thanks to the American School Health Association, Association of State and Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors, National Assembly on School-based Health Care, National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners and National Association of School Nurses, whose members and constituents participated in the research and provided valuable ideas shared in this guide.

“Helping Youth Make Better Food Choices: Perceptions, Barriers and Promising Approaches Among Nutrition, Health and Public Health Professionals,” an Action for Healthy Kids Research Report, is available at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

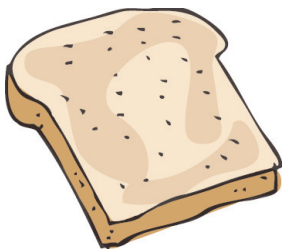
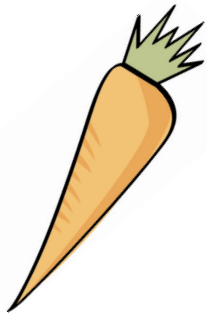
It's no secret that today's youth have a greater prevalence of overweight and obesity than previous generations. Undoubtedly the lack of physical activity children participate in and the amount of food they eat are important contributing factors to this problem. Equally significant, however, is the nutritional quality of the foods children eat — an issue that affects all youth. Regardless of weight, many children are undernourished and as a result face both short-term and long-term consequences. Children's eating habits also impact their behavior, readiness to learn and overall well-being.

The U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services' 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* include guidance about “Food Groups to Encourage,” stating that youth need to eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat or fat-free milk and milk products to meet recommended minimum servings for optimal health. Currently, less than 2 percent of children and adolescents consume the minimum number of recommended servings from these food groups. This has led to low dietary intake of calcium, potassium, fiber, magnesium and Vitamin E.

Nutrition, health and public health professionals who participated in a recent **Action for Healthy Kids** research project identified a number of critical barriers that prevent youth from making better food choices, particularly from the Food Groups to Encourage. Chief among these challenges, according to survey respondents, are engaging parents and caregivers; access to tasty, appealing, healthful food options; engaging kids in eating healthful foods; the pervasive influence of media and advertising; and educating youth not only about why to eat healthfully but how to do it.

Survey respondents were invited to share strategies and approaches that they are using to combat these barriers.

This guide highlights some of their responses — ways these nutrition, health and public health professionals are making progress in helping kids make better food choices.



CHALLENGE No.1

Engaging Parents and Caregivers

The number one barrier that prevents children and youth from making better food choices, according to nutrition, health and public health professionals who participated in the Action for Healthy Kids research report, is parents and caregivers. More than three-fourths of respondents cited lack of parent/caregiver support as the major obstacle they face in helping kids make better food choices.

Parents and caregivers are children's first and most important teachers. They strongly influence the food choices of their children by fostering certain values and attitudes, rewarding or reinforcing specific behaviors, and serving as role models. More importantly, they make decisions about which foods are available at home, where and when foods can be eaten in the house, and children's allowances. Parents play a fundamental role as household policy makers. But economic and time constraints, as well as the stresses and challenges of daily living, may make healthy eating difficult to achieve for many families.

Survey respondents tend to believe that no amount of work on the part of schools and the community to increase children's intake of nutritious foods can succeed if parents aren't part of the solution — it has to be a total team effort — in and out of school. Children and youth typically won't make better food choices unless parents and caregivers lead by example to instill the habits they hope their children will adopt. When parents and caregivers set a positive example and provide healthful food options, over time kids learn to make better food choices.

Tips for Achieving Parent/Caregiver Buy-in

- > **Parents are role models.** Emphasize to parents that their children depend on them to choose healthful foods. Remind parents that kids can't eat what parents don't buy and eat themselves. If parents want their kids to drink their milk and eat their spinach, they have to eat those foods too.
- > **Make it simple.** Provide parents with nutrition information that translates into foods to buy and try. Give caregivers information on how to control their supply lines — what foods they serve for meals and snacks. Keep ideas simple, recipes short and ingredients easy to find.
- > **Eat family meals.** Engage everyone in better eating habits by encouraging family meals. Parents/caregivers act as role models, and kids who take part in regular family meals are more likely to try new foods and eat more fruits and vegetables.

- > **Parents need nutrition counseling too!** Develop a friendly relationship with parents by regularly scheduling support sessions to guide them. Build on successes by setting short-term, attainable goals that the entire family can reach — one good habit at a time.
- > **Be culturally aware.** Pay attention to cultures other than your own. Assemble materials for parents in their native languages and be familiar with commonly eaten foods by the ethnic groups that you counsel. Be sure to address both cultural barriers and aids, such as family dynamics, traditions, celebrations and spiritual beliefs.
- > **Be cost (and calorie) effective.** Show parents that healthy eating doesn't have to be expensive. Provide cost and calorie comparisons of healthful meals and snacks typically eaten both in and out of the home.
- > **Stop the clean plate club.** For many people hunger and fullness signals aren't working so well. Teach the entire family to learn when they are satisfied and stop eating. The meal isn't done when the plate is clean; it is when the belly tells the brain it is full.
- > **Practice portion control.** Educate parents on appropriate serving sizes for the family — whether they are eating in or out.
- > **Be interactive.** Just like their kids, many parents may not purchase unfamiliar products. Lead grocery store tours or hold taste tests so that parents can sample new foods. Offering coupons may also encourage the purchase of healthful foods.

Resources that Can Help

American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org

Delicious Decisions (American Heart Association): www.deliciousdecisions.org

KidsHealth (Nemours Foundation): www.kidshealth.org

PTA Lifestyles: A Parent's Guide (National Parent Teacher Association): www.pta.org

We Can! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition (National Institutes of Health): www.wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov

Ellyn Satter Associates: www.ellynsatter.com

Feeding Kids e-newsletter (24 Carrot Press): To join, send e-mail to join-feedingkids@telelists.com

WIC Works Resource System: www.nal.usda.gov/wicworks

Healthy Habits for Healthy Kids — A Nutrition and Activity Guide for Parents (American Dietetic Association):

http://www.eatright.org/cps/rde/xchg/ada/hs.xsl/nutrition_3800_ENU_HTML.htm

CHALLENGE No.2

Access to Tasty, Appealing, Healthful Food Options



The food environment faced by most youth is challenging. High-calorie, inexpensive, low-nutrient food choices surround them, and often those who are most at risk have the least access to healthful options. Children and their families live in a commercial environment that strongly influences food behaviors, and many of us make immediate trade-offs in taste, cost and convenience — forgoing health.

A recurring theme expressed by many of the nutrition, health and public health professionals who participated in the Action for Healthy Kids research report is that children eat what they know. That is, if kids' only food experiences involve foods with little nutritional value, they won't be able to make better food choices. Respondents also indicated that it's easier to encourage healthful foods than it is to convince kids to give up certain “junk” foods.

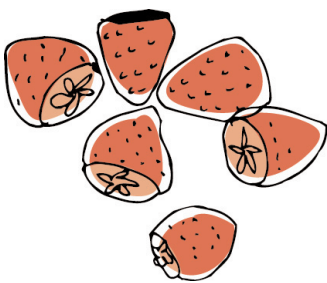


Respondents offered a variety of ways to overcome these problems.

Changing the school food environment so that unhealthy options are not available, providing access to healthful choices, and starting young and building positive attitudes are the keys to helping youth make better food choices. Respondents also indicated that parents and schools, as well as the food, beverage, restaurant, entertainment and leisure industries, all share in the responsibility for supporting the well-being of youth.

Tips for Increasing Kids' Exposure to Healthful Foods

- > **Provide variety.** Expose kids to as much variety of low-fat and fat-free dairy, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains as possible. Let these foods become any portion of a meal (entree, salad, side, etc.).
- > **Involve the school.** Encourage schools to provide healthful choices. Advocate to eliminate soda and high-sugar drinks on the campus. Collaborate with the district wellness team and the food service department to implement healthy alternatives.
- > **Money matters.** Offer suggestions for successful non-food fundraisers and healthful refreshments for classroom parties.
- > **Start young.** Start training children about foods when they are young since they are most influenced by their families during the early years. Likes and dislikes begin forming during infancy, so offer a variety of foods early on.



- > **Encourage the “one-bite taste.”** Don’t force a child to eat, but offer one or two bites. Don’t get upset if they don’t like it; keep trying. Acquiring a taste for new foods may take up to 10 to 15 tries.
- > **Offer, then add it to the menu.** Many kids will not risk paying for a meal or snack they are not familiar with. Design a taste test before making healthful foods regular offerings in the school cafeteria. Ask kids to vote on the various foods and elect the “winners” that make it on the menu. And think beyond fruits and veggies — there are many grains and low-fat and fat-free dairy products kids might enjoy sampling.
- > **Food as fuel.** Food is to the body like gas is to a car. Help kids think of their stomachs as gas tanks. Just like you wouldn’t want to overflow your gas tank, you don’t want to overflow your stomach. Kids understand that if you take care of your car, the longer — and better — it will run.
- > **Involve parents.** Parental involvement is essential. Collaborate with the PTA/PTO or other parent groups. Invite them to join the wellness committee or help plan the annual field day.

Resources that Can Help

Action for Healthy Kids: www.ActionForHealthyKids.org

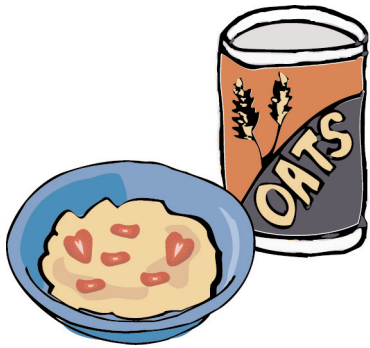
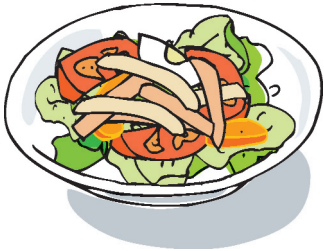
American Dietetic Association: www.eatright.org

American School Health Association: www.ashaweb.org

Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment (U.S. Department of Agriculture): www.fns.usda.gov

Meals Matter (Dairy Council of California): www.mealsmatter.org

School Nutrition Association: www.schoolnutrition.org



CHALLENGE No.3

Engaging Kids in Eating Healthful Foods

Nutrition, health and public health professionals feel that youth themselves are somewhat responsible for their own poor diets. In fact, 85 percent of the respondents to the Action for Healthy Kids survey cited interest and engagement on the part of youth as a leading barrier that kids face in eating items from the Food Groups to Encourage.

Respondents also recognized, however, that part of the problem remains the environment and the forces competing for children's attention. Healthy eating isn't always immediately relevant to kids' lives. At the same time, children might not have adults or peers in their lives who model healthy eating behaviors they can emulate.

One solution, according to respondents, is to reframe nutrition as something important to youth. Rather than stress the long-term negative health effects of obesity, tap into kids' acute awareness of their image and abilities. Another solution is to help children take ownership of their eating habits so they feel that eating well is a choice, rather than something they have to do. Finally, adults with children in their lives must walk the walk by improving their own eating behaviors.

Tips for Encouraging Interest and Engagement Among Children and Youth

- > **Who cares?** Focus on what kids care about: energy, positive body image, athletics, strength and fitness, environmental issues, and school performance. Provide kids with positive, real-life success stories that demonstrate how making healthful food choices has positively affected others.
- > **Make the connection.** Educate youth on the connection between healthy eating and achievement in other areas, such as academics or sports.
- > **Small changes add up.** Encourage healthful foods that taste good rather than trying to persuade kids to give up their favorite "junk" foods. Emphasize small, simple changes that the child chooses and gradually add more healthful foods until they become a habit.
- > **Diets Don't Work.** Research indicates that chronic dieting can lead to eating-disordered attitudes and behaviors. Offer suggestions to swap "junk" food with healthier choices as a change in habits — because it causes the body to feel good and perform better — not as a diet.

- > **How do I feel?** Have students track how they feel — better quality of sleep, improved mood and energy level, less stomachaches or headaches — as they progress toward eating healthier foods.
- > **Tracking progress.** Have adolescents keep a food diary for one week. Review with them what they are eating and why they may not be eating a balanced diet. This practice enables kids to gain an appreciation of what they are putting in their bodies.
- > **Involve students.** Involve students in making changes to their school environment. Often when students are involved in the process, they are more likely to participate in healthier options and approaches.
- > **Be a good role model.** When kids see adults practicing what they preach, they are more likely to take those lessons to heart. Parents, teachers and other role models must be willing to pave the way.
- > **Provide tools.** Don't assume parents or youth have the tools they need to make more healthful choices. Bring families together and teach them to read food labels, MyPyramid charts, shopping lists and recipes so they understand what they are feeding their bodies.

Resources that Can Help

Generation Fit (American Cancer Society): www.cancer.org

Healthy Eating and Activity Together (National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners): www.napnap.org

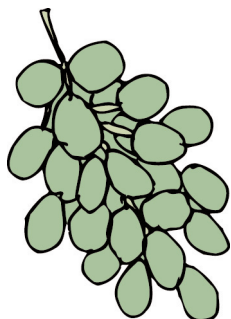
MyPyramid for Kids (U.S. Department of Agriculture): www.mypyramid.gov/kids

Ready, Set, FIT! (American Academy of Family Physicians): www.aafp.org

Food Label Education Tools & General Information (U.S. Food and Drug Administration):
www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/lab-gen.html

CHALLENGE No.4

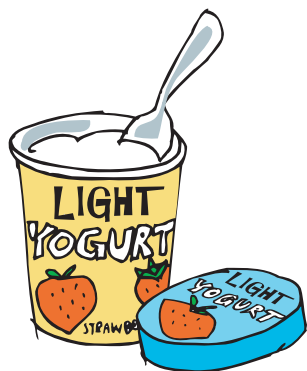
The Pervasive Influence of Media and Advertising



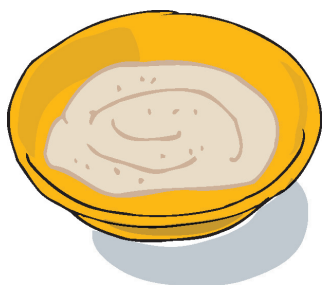
The media have a powerful, ever-present influence on all of American society, and children are no exception. Youth are exposed to countless media messages involving foods and beverages, especially on television and the Internet.

Research has shown that children may view as many as 40,000 advertisements a year through television alone. Additionally, the more television minutes children watch, the more calories they consume. And the snacks they consume while watching television are often less healthful choices.

Advertising can affect children's food knowledge, choices and consumption of particular food products, as well as their food-purchasing decisions made directly or indirectly through parents. Ninety-eight percent of respondents to the Action for Healthy Kids survey rated parents as an "important" or "extremely important" influence in helping youth consume fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and fat-free dairy products, and 90 percent rated educators and teachers as such. Additionally, 97 percent of respondents indicated that media and advertising are second in influence only to parents and caregivers in terms of helping youth consume foods from the Food Groups to Encourage. Food marketing aimed at kids can have a powerful impact and can undermine parental and school influences, helping to fuel the epidemic of childhood obesity.



To counteract the persuasive influence of the media, nutrition, health and public health professionals recommend educating youth on how to separate "good" from "bad" media. They also suggest that parents set limits on television viewing and not allow television in the bedroom. School-based media literacy programming can educate youth to be more critical media consumers. This is an empowering way to engage students around the issue. Also suggested was turning the tables on marketing — the same techniques that food companies use to sell unhealthful foods can be used to promote nutritional choices.



Tips for Cutting through the Media Clutter

- > **Set TV limits.** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours a day of screen time, which includes TV, non-academic computer and video games. Encourage parents to set a family screen time allowance. And don't allow TV to be viewed in the bedroom, where both kids and adults tune in more often and the practice of which can affect sleep patterns.

- > **Ad-free schools.** You can't shield kids from the media, but you can make sure that the school environment is free of ads and product placements for non-nutritious foods.
- > **Use what works.** Learn from successful marketing techniques to encourage better food choices. Use a variety of approaches so that you reach all kids. For example, use rap, country and popular music; surfer and skater models.
- > **Get involved — and bring the kids along.** Encourage government officials to set standards on what foods may be marketed to kids in schools and on TV. Sponsor media campaigns that encourage healthful eating and physical activity. Encourage kids to take the lead and challenge them to fight against the power of mass-marketed, high-calorie and nutrient-deficient foods.
- > **Teach media literacy.** Encourage kids to be responsible for their health, which includes food choices. Work on kids' media-literacy skills — it's the best way to counter the effects of food marketers.
- > **Positive media messages.** There is great potential for the media and entertainment industries to encourage healthy eating habits. Support industry and media that are working for policy changes that provide positive messages to the general public, parents and children.
- > **Make it cool and fun!** Do whatever it takes to make healthful eating appear cool. Find the "change agents" in your community. This approach trains a group of teens to market physical activity and healthful eating to their fellow students/peers.

Resources that Can Help

Annenberg Public Policy Center: www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org

Children, Health, and the Media: Report and Fact Sheet Series (Kaiser Family Foundation): www.kff.org

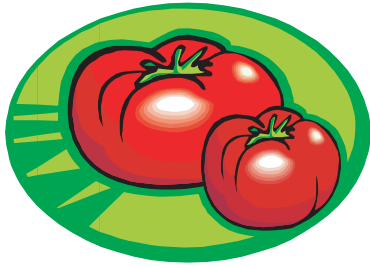
Children and Media (PBS Parents): www.pbs.org/parents/childrenandmedia

Media-Smart Youth: Eat, Think, and Be Active! (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development): www.nichd.nih.gov/msy/msy.htm

Preventing Childhood Obesity: Advertising, Marketing, and Media (Institute of Medicine): www.iom.edu

Center for Media Literacy: www.medialit.org

Just Think: www.justthink.org



CHALLENGE No.5

Educating Youth Not Only About Why to Eat Healthfully but How to Do It

The nutrition, health and public health professionals surveyed by Action for Healthy Kids cited nutrition education as the most effective strategy to help youth make better food selections. Indeed, there are many opportunities for learning and practicing healthy eating in the school environment — coordinated changes in the curriculum, in-school promotions and after-school programs all offer great potential.

Health professionals also play a vital role in the education of both children and their parents by making credible recommendations on dietary intake and physical activity throughout children’s lives. They can help make parents more aware of their children’s overall health status, and they have the authority to encourage action by advocating health-promotion efforts.

In order to make healthy eating relevant and engaging for youth, it is important to focus on how to make better food choices in addition to why. Thus, respondents’ advice emphasizes the importance of hands-on learning and the integration of healthy eating habits into children’s lives outside of school.

Tips for Improving Nutrition Education

- > **Farm to school.** Teach kids where their food comes from and how it is raised and grown. Visit food manufacturing plants or a dairy farm, and invite a farmer to school. Grow vegetables in a school garden.
- > **Get your hands dirty.** When kids help prepare their own foods, they are engaged and more likely to try healthful choices. Involve kids in food planning, selection, preparation and cooking.
- > **Show and tell.** Use the school meal menu to help educate youth about healthful eating. Add food and nutrition tips to the menu and/or send home healthful-food messages in students’ weekly folders.
- > **Healthy messages.** Kids of any age can help create health messages — using rhymes, raps and riddles. They can take turns reading during morning announcements at school.
- > **Portion distortion.** Teach children and youth about realistic food portions using common, everyday items, and compare healthy portions to what they are eating or being served. Focus on age-appropriate serving sizes.

- > **Make it real.** Demonstrate how to make healthful snacks with products bought at the local grocery store or corner store. Children, and adults, are surprised to learn how much sugar is in their favorite soda, iced tea or energy drink — let them measure it out using sugar cubes. Read and compare food labels from a variety of foods.

Resources that Can Help

Dietary Guidelines for Americans: www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines

Fruits & Veggies — More Matters (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Produce for Better Health Foundation): www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org

Kids a Cookin' (Kansas State University): www.kidsacookin.com

Milk Matters (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development): www.nichd.nih.gov/milk/milk.cfm

National Dairy Council: www.nationaldairycouncil.org

National Farm to School Network: www.farmentoschool.org

Portion Distortion! (National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute/National Institutes of Health):
www.hp2010.nhlbihin.net/portion

Supermarket Sleuths (U.S. Department of Agriculture): www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Parents/sleuth.html

Wheat Foods Council: www.wheatfoods.org

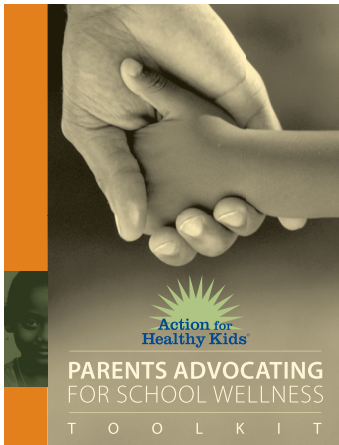
Whole Grains Council: www.wholegrainscouncil.org



Developed by Action for Healthy Kids as part of a continuing initiative in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, **Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge** supports school wellness by making good health part of the rhythm and culture of the entire school environment. Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge is a year-long initiative that challenges America's youth, their families and schools to incorporate healthy food choices and physical activity into their daily lives. The program consists of a series of theme-based challenges spaced throughout the year to promote, engage and recognize students for their efforts to make better food choices and move more.

The online toolkit includes a guide and resources for conducting tasting events and promotions at school that feature the Food Groups to Encourage — fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat/nonfat milk and milk products.

Learn more at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org/gotuwc.



Parents Advocating for School Wellness – Recognizing parents as a largely untapped force for change in school wellness, Action for Healthy Kids and MEE Productions — an organization widely regarded for its success in mobilizing parents in low-income, urban communities — have produced this toolkit to help Action for Healthy Kids Teams and other school wellness advocates unlock the enormous potential of parents as change agents, to engage them as partners in support of healthier schools for their children.



In partnership with the National Football League, Action for Healthy Kids developed **ReCharge! Energizing After-School**, the first nationally distributed after-school program that fully integrates nutrition and physical activity through teamwork-based strategies for youth in grades 3-6. ReCharge! Energizing After-School focuses on four concepts — “Energy In” (nutrition), “Energy Out” (physical activity), Teamwork, and Goal-setting. An online ReCharge! resource center provides valuable technical assistance to after-school program staff and educators who implement the program.