

Reshape The Family Diet -- Avoid Dinnertime Trouble/Cyndi Thomas, ND

When I announced that my family needed to change its diet somewhat... well, to say my children weren't as excited as me would be an understatement.

More than once they cried: What? Salad again! When are we going to have some real food?

My understanding reply was usually, "This is dinner...eat it or starve." After all, I had taken it upon myself to get my family in the best possible health -- NO MATTER WHAT!

I had decided no more junk food. We were going to sprout alfalfa and have produce delivered by truck once a week. We were going to have meals made up of just fruits and vegetables. We were going to drink juice made from... gulp, barley grass and carrots. My kids were going to be thrilled with the change!

So I sat them down -- all seven of them -- and gave a brilliant lecture on the importance of good nutrition. I even had charts and graphs. I knew that once they understood, the change wouldn't be a problem at all. After all, I had intelligent kids. They would understand. Right? Wrong!

C'mon mom... do you really mean no more hot dogs, hamburgers, ice cream, brownies, potato chips and soda pop. You don't expect me to give up soda pop -- DO YOU?

I no longer recommend anyone do what I did. My path to healthy living was paved with good intentions. But my family suffered the potholes that accompanied my attempt to overhaul their eating habits overnight.

You won't have to endure as much agony. I've compiled a few guidelines to make such a transition easier for the caring mother (or father) wanting what's best for her or his family:

1. Do not say anything to the family about what is to transpire. (The exception here is if the family already has an excellent, above-average level of communication and they would rather have apples instead of Ding-Dongs for dessert!) So like I said, "Don't say anything."
2. Without comment -- and over a period of months -- the meals should gradually become more nutritious.
3. To complement to the regular meat main course, you serve lightly steamed vegetables and a tossed green salad. Less high-fat dairy products, fried foods, pre-prepared foods and canned foods appear on the table.

4. Make a deal with the kids: We eat like I say five days a week... twice weekly, you can pick the menu. Most kids would be agreeable to that. Mine were. Of course, it took me a month to realize the importance of letting them choose occasionally.

(It was during that month that my then 16-year-old son came home one night with two large pepperoni pizzas. He walked in with a smile and a grin-delivered greeting: "Gee mom, you work so hard. I thought I'd take care of dinner tonight!" With his minimum wage salary from sacking groceries, takeout pizza was something he couldn't afford very often.)

The transition is much smoother when mom AND Dad agree on the diet change. Still the rule is the less fanfare, the better. Slowly introduce more nutritious menus and set a good example of eating and enjoying. Make positive comments about how good the vegetables taste -- and how good they are for the body.

If questions are raised as to why the menus are different, be honest and direct: "We've been reading (or the doctor told us -- or Bob and Mary have been telling us) that junk food makes our bodies sick."

Follow with statements on how much better you have been feeling since eating "right" and comment on any noticed changes in the children's health or behavior. For example: "Johnny, you sure have been easier to get out of bed in the mornings since we've changed our diet."

Don't neglect an opportunity to point out to the children when a slip away from healthful eating produces direct negative physical discomfort. Whether it's affecting you ("Boy, that ice cream sure gave me a headache!") or them ("Johnny, see how you are acting since you've eaten that piece of cake?")

Keep the "wrong" food out of the house. That way your kids won't be tempted into eating something they shouldn't. If you must go to the store to get something, you will often think twice about whether it's needed -- OR NOT.

Children learn by example. A household that manages food properly will help children adopt healthy eating habits.

Here are a few quick additional tips:

- Praise your child's efforts to make better dietary choices.
- Stock the pantry with healthy foods.
- Provide balanced meals at regular times.
- Keep snacks healthy (raw fruits, veggies, etc.)
- Lead by example. You MUST also eat healthy.
- Reward good behavior with nonfood items, such as CDs and clothes.

Changing a lifestyle doesn't have to be complicated. Slow and steady always wins the race.

My pop drinker rarely indulges anymore. My sugar addict gets a headache when she indulges. My younger ones can't eat off the children's menu at restaurants -- they don't offer salads on the kid's menu!

And, my husband totally avoids dairy to keep his allergies from becoming a problem.

Are we perfect? Of course not. But we now spend more time eating the right things as opposed to the wrong. And it does get easier with time.

I know your family is worth the effort. And someday they will realize how right you were and maybe even thank you for it!

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