

WELLSPRING

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BE THAT SHINING LIGHT

6 TIPS FOR MODELING A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

BY ESTI ASHER, MS, RDN, LD

There is something incredibly special and almost tangible in the air during Chanukah. Menorahs on display in windows or outside of homes, tunes of *Maoz Tzur* and *Haneiros Halalu*, and of course, many opportunities to celebrate with traditional oily and fried foods. With extra family time and exposure to festive Chanukah foods, now is an excellent opportunity to role model positive eating behaviors and attitudes for our children.

As parents, it is important for us to be cognizant that our children watch and internalize our behaviors and attitudes—whether we realize it or not. The way we eat, in addition to the way we speak about food and our body, may have an effect on our children’s food choices and beyond.

Below are six tips toward modeling (and maintaining for ourselves!) a positive, healthy attitude toward food and body image.

1 Regard food as your fuel.

It’s imperative for us to understand and relay to our kids that the food we eat is what fuels our body to do what it needs to do. We can take this a step further and explain the specific ways in which different foods help our body. Therefore, because we want our body to work as best as it can, we aim to choose foods that are helpful to our body most of the time.

2 Watch your words.

Many of us label foods without realizing. However, the ideal is to avoid labeling foods as “good,” “bad,” “junk,” etc. Using strong words may be confusing and harmful for our children (and for us), creating a “black and white” perception of food and our food choices. Instead, aim to use neutral language when referring to foods: “This will give you lots of energy and help you concentrate better.” “This has a lot of sugar, so it’s not good for the body to have too much of it.” Speaking of food in this way will also help instill the message that generally speaking, all foods can fit into a healthy lifestyle. Yes—even that latke and donut!

3 Avoid an all-or-nothing mentality.

In general, all foods have their place in a healthy and well-balanced diet—for both adults and kids. If we have a list—whether literal or theoretical—of forbidden foods, it will conflict with a healthy, positive, flexible, and inclusive mentality. At the same time, it is valuable for us to be mindful of (and communicate to our children) which foods are helpful to our body, and which foods—if eaten too much—may be harmful. This will help avoid an all-or-nothing mentality and promote balance with our food choices—and balance with our thoughts related to those food choices.

5 Listen to your body's cues and verbalize/acknowledge them. Ask your child to do the same.

Try to get into the habit of noticing how your body feels. Regarding satiety, do you feel famished, hungry, satisfied, full, or uncomfortably full? Use this awareness to help guide your food choices. When it seems natural, use language to share those feelings with your children. Feel free to say something like, “Wow, that second donut looks delicious, but I’m not hungry anymore, and if I eat more, I might not feel good. I think I’ll set it aside and have some of it tomorrow instead.” Ask your children questions such as, “How does your tummy feel?” “Do you feel full right now?” More importantly, acknowledge, validate, and respect what they tell you. “You’re too full? So then you don’t need to finish your plate. When you get hungry again, you can come back to take some more.” This approach encourages our children to listen to their inner cues, a tool that will come to good use throughout their lives.

If you are concerned about your own size, or your child’s size, there are appropriate ways to address those concerns (such as speaking with a dietitian privately). Furthermore, aim to shift the focus from external to internal; one suggestion to achieve this is to recognize and celebrate character traits that you admire in yourself and in your children. ♡

4 Refer to yourself in a kind way, regardless of your food choices.

It sounds obvious, but this is something many of us need to work on. Just as we do not want to speak about food as being “good” or “bad,” we also want to avoid referring to ourselves as “good” or “bad” based on our food choices. Eating a piece of cake does not render someone a bad person, and it is important that our children know that. Furthermore, we are not “cheaters” or “cheating” based on the food that we eat.

6 Pivot from an external focus.

A child’s perception of their body, otherwise known as body image, is strongly influenced by what they see modeled by their parents. Try to avoid emphasizing physical appearance (a cornerstone in Hellenistic culture), commenting on weight, speaking negatively about your body, or following a restrictive diet. Each of these examples may have a damaging effect on both yourself and your children.

Esti Asher, MS, RDN, LD, offers nutrition counseling services, in addition to a variety of nutrition presentations. “How to Speak with Your Children About Nutrition, Health, and Body Image” is a live webinar presentation for parents offered to schools. If you are interested in learning more about this presentation and how to offer it at your school, or to contact Esti with feedback or inquiries regarding her nutritional services, please email her at esti@estiashernutrition.com or visit estiashernutrition.com.