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Top Living Story

Parents need to weigh in on kids' eating habits

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Parents play a key role in shaping young eating habits and attitudes about food, nutritionists say. But, too often, they're sending mixed signals.

There's the mom who demands that her kids eat breakfast, then skips the meal herself. There's the dad who bans chips and candy, elevating the forbidden food to tempting levels. And there are parents everywhere resorting to rules and offhand dinner comments that turn food into rewards and punishments.

How's a kid supposed to enjoy good food -- and feel good about eating it?

What parents need to realize, food experts say, is that what they say and do is just as important as what they put on their kid's plate.

"Raising kids with healthy attitudes towards food will ultimately lead to older kids and adults that choose to eat in a healthy way," says Robin Miller, a nutritionist who hosts the Food Network show *Quick Fix Meals with Robin Miller*.

The mother of two boys -- Kyle, 7, and Luke, 5 -- Miller will be in town Saturday, when she'll be dishing out healthy dining tips at the South Beach Wine & Food Festival.

Miller is known for recipes that help super-busy moms, but what isn't so widely known is that she got into this business because her older sister, Stacy, died at age 21 after battling the eating disorder anorexia nervosa. Miller, who was 17 at the time, said the experience convinced her to study nutrition. Years later, she's hyper alert to developing healthy food attitudes in her own children.

Symptoms for anorexia and bulimia can occur as young as kindergarten, according to the National Eating Disorders Association, which estimates nearly 10 million women and one million men in the United States suffer from eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. The peak onset for the disorders is during puberty and the late teen-early adult years. About 40 percent of newly identified cases of anorexia are in girls, ages 15 to 19.

Those are the extreme cases. Nutritionists warn that many more suffer from obsessions with body image and dieting that start at an absurdly young age. In one 2001 study of 234 Girl Scouts, about 30 percent of the 10-year-old girls told researchers at the University of Minnesota they were trying to lose weight.

Ivonne Hamilton, a registered dietician and nutritionist who is an eating disorders specialist,

says she has counseled clients as young as 8 in her office at The Counseling Group in Miami. As the mother of two young daughters -- Cristine, 13, and Juliette, 10 -- Hamilton says she's constantly rebutting diet claims and body messages they see on TV.

'If there's a diet commercial that ends with a woman saying how she's lost 10 pounds and now has a new car, a new boyfriend and life is great, I give my girls some healthy sarcasm: 'Oh yeah, her life is so much better because she lost 10 pounds,' " Hamilton says.

Hamilton subscribes to an 80-20 relationship with food. If 80 percent of the time we do the healthy thing, then it's OK to grab a doughnut or indulge yourself 20 percent of the time.

Parents who force children to eat everything on their plate or snatch a plate away if a child appears to be eating too much are not allowing their kids to discover their limits, Hamilton said. Children need to "realize their own fullness," she said, or what it feels like to overeat.

"I tell children to look for the hug in their stomachs," Hamilton said. "If it feels like someone is gently hugging you, that's satisfaction. If you press two fingers hard into your belly, that feels like overeating. If you punch yourself in the stomach, that is binge eating."

For her two boys, the Food Network's Miller makes a point of putting out a mix of food -- cheese, fruit, nuts and doughnuts -- on one plate to emphasize there are no "good" or "bad" foods; they can all be enjoyed in moderation.

The two nutritionists are in sync when it comes to other advice for parents:

- **Practice what you preach.** The best thing you can do for your kids is to be a good role model and eat the way you want your child to eat. Choose a variety of healthy foods from all the food groups, eat in moderation and make exercise part of your regular routine.
- **Don't ban foods.** Live in reality. Kids will encounter cakes and other treats at parties. Allow them to explore but at the same time teach them what their body needs. "Let's face it, it's nearly impossible to eat perfectly balanced meals and snacks all day, every day," Miller said. "The goal is to enjoy a varied healthy diet most of the time, which allows for indulgences now and then."
- **Get kids in the kitchen.** From an early age, involve children in preparing food, such as snipping herbs with safe scissors, cracking eggs, stirring. If they feel they're part of the process, they're more likely to try the finished product.
- **Pair old with new.** To widen your child's palate, pair a favorite food like chicken strips with a new flavor, such as a dip made from mustard and honey with fresh chopped peaches.
- **Get excited about food.** Show kids how enjoyable food can be with comments like "Wow, check out that!" or "Look how colorful!" Make eating fun.