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inner **BALANCE**

## Eat, Taste, Feel

Teaching your kids (and yourself)  
the ABCs of mindful eating.

BY HEATHER BOERNER

Finishing her vegetables is the least of Tina Daniel's\* problems. An adventurous eater, Daniel loves everything from brussel sprouts to sushi to corn chips. But she also loves lots of all of that food, and that worries her mother Angie.

"As a baby, she would eat until she threw up if I let her. She doesn't recognize feelings of fullness," Angie says. "As she's getting older, she's really conscious of how different she looks from other girls and is comparing herself to them. She's starting to get upset."

Even playing four sports, Tina is gaining weight. Angie, who recalls her own childhood as an obese 11-year-old, fears that shame makes it harder for Tina to change her eating habits. She often finds herself soothing her daughter after teasing at school and attempting to talk about Tina's eating without making her feel different than Alan, her skinny 6-year-old brother.

Shame, rampant among overweight kids, magnifies the issue, says Kathy Kater, a licensed social worker who is a

Wisconsin family therapist and author of *Healthy Body Image: Teaching Your Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies, Too!* (National Eating Disorder Association, 2005). The mortification begins when children feel embarrassed for wanting more food, Kater explains. The internal chagrin gets exacerbated by family and cultural taboos against larger body types and is then made worse by headlines that warn about the catastrophic health risks of obesity.

Shockingly, the problem affects infants as well—a recent study in the journal *Obesity* warned that even infants are becoming overweight. As incidences of type-2 diabetes in children grow, parents need to learn to face their children's weight problems. However, the downside of the super-sized hoopla crops

inside

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up in the school yard—kids teasing and bullying the “fatties.” According to a 2003 study, researchers found that children are more likely to single out and stigmatize overweight children than they were 40 years ago. “It’s essential that

nutritionists help children become gently reacquainted with their bodies and appetites without the tacit agenda of weight loss. A study in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found dieting teens more likely to have

gained weight five years later—and more likely to diet unhealthfully, using laxatives or bingeing and purging.

Teaching your child to feed himself mindfully starts with acknowledging to your family, your child, and yourself that mindful eating is not a crash diet in disguise. Nuanced and subtle, mindful eating practices focus on the experience of eating, not on how

have to have a history of mindfulness meditation to eat consciously. To practice mindful eating with children, start by teaching your kids the ropes. Then turn a compassionate eye toward yourself and tune in to your reactions.

•• **First, eat meals together.** Not only does it make for a more cohesive family life, but it also gets you and the children away from the television and computer while you eat, says Susan Bartell, author of *Dr. Susan’s Girls-Only Guide to Weight Loss* (Parent Positive Press, 2006) “Your kids shouldn’t be IM-ing and watching TV at the same time they are eating, as kids love to do,” Dr. Bartell says. “Mindfulness means really eating, and then really thinking about how it tastes and how you feel.”

•• **Check in with your child before you serve a meal.** Ask her about her hunger level, suggests Christie, on a scale of zero (might eat the whole spread, including plates and tablecloth) to 10 (couldn’t eat a bite if you

## Surprisingly, mindfulness may be more effective than dieting to help children eat manageable portions.

much someone eats. These practices don’t require that your chubby youngster eat different foods than

the rest of your family or that you dump all the fattening food from your cupboards. Your whole family does, however, need to get on board and make a commitment to healthy eating, without worrying about losing weight.

“Parents need to be clear that they are providing a positive approach,” Kater says. “Changing your relationship with food needs to be based on wanting to do something good for yourself.”

### Mustering mindfulness

Nutritionist Barbara Christie, co-owner of Intuitive Eating Counseling in Santa Cruz, California, notes that you don’t

paid her). Then let her serve herself how much food she thinks will do the trick. (You may have to help your little one scoop out the food, but be sure she determines how much goes on her plate in relation to her hunger cues.) This teaches children to connect with their bodies and associate serving sizes with satisfaction levels.

•• **Do little things to reduce temptation to overeat:** Serve up meals in the kitchen, not at the table, and don’t cook so much that you have leftovers for days. Newly mindful eaters will have a hard time resisting leftovers and food within arm’s reach.

Over time, mindfulness techniques encourage children to differentiate emotional eating from hunger, Christie says. Children may even discover they have food allergies by becoming more

Serving meals from the kitchen, not at the table will help discourage seconds.

clinicians, parents, and anyone who interacts with children understands how to respond to eating issues without causing harm,” she says.

### Through thick and thin

The solution starts with your child’s mind, not mouth. Surprisingly, mindfulness may be more effective than dieting in helping children eat manageable portions. A study in the *Journal of Health Psychology* found mindfulness techniques, such as focused concentration and attention to inner cues, reduced the frequency and severity of eating binges. By using these techniques, therapists and

aware of how food makes them feel, explains Diana Elwyn, a therapist and co-owner with Christie of Intuitive Eating Counseling.

## Busting the food police

Finally, for your child to learn how much makes her full, she has to eat to her satisfaction. Refrain from monitoring how much goes in her mouth or questioning whether she's really that hungry. Letting go of micromanaging your kids' mouths may feel counterintuitive (and even painful to watch), but the control you think you relinquish never really existed in the first place.

If letting your child eat however much he wants makes you uncomfortable, rest assured that many parents share your distress. We all have to unlearn years of dieting and

**Mindfulness means really eating,  
and then really thinking about how  
it tastes and how you feel.**

weight obsession, notes Elwyn. So instead of monitoring what your child eats, try tuning in to your reactions.

"As a parent, you have control over what's brought into the home and how much," she says. "But you don't control how much or when your child eats. Parents need to hear themselves when they start wanting to police what's going in their child's mouth. Realize, 'I'm starting to feel anxious.' But do whatever you can to at least not say it."

Why? It backfires, Kater says.

"Being told we shouldn't want to eat doesn't make the feelings go away," Kater warns. "Then children feel they have to hide it. That's when children learn to sneak food behind the bushes, behind the garage, or in the middle of the night."

Instead of questioning your child's appetite, choose a food-free time to ask your child how he feels and what he needs. Those bonds, not diet, can alleviate emotional eating, Elwyn says.

Take a moment to question yourself: Do you eat healthfully only when trying to lose weight? Do you make comments about your body or feel ashamed when you eat too much? Tackling these questions honestly with your partner or a therapist will help prevent passing your own food gremlins on to your kids.

"I just want Tina to be comfortable in her own skin," says her mother Angie. "I don't want her to make the same mistake I did, spending 37 years wishing I looked like someone else. It just doesn't work. If I can instill in her that she needs to play the game of life with the strengths she has, not wishing she was like someone else, it will all be worthwhile." **AM**

*\*Name changed to protect privacy*