

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Junk Food Cravings

Question: My daughter only wants to eat junk food, like potato chips and cookies. How can I help her understand the importance of healthy eating choices?

With the hectic schedules of today's families, it can be difficult to find time to plan and eat healthy meals, and your child's junk food cravings only make it harder! At this age, your child is developing her ability to use self control to make thoughtful decisions, instead of just being on auto-pilot. You can support your child's growing capacity for self control and encourage healthy eating habits at the same time by promoting the life skill of Critical Thinking.

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

1

Problem-solve with your child.

Critical Thinking calls on Executive Functions of the brain, used to manage attention, emotions and behavior in order to achieve goals. During the preschool years, Executive Function skills are developing rapidly, including a growing capacity to be able to reflect, analyze, reason, plan and evaluate. Frank Keil of Yale University says,

Critical thinking is the ability to step back and look at what you're doing, to look at the dimensions of the task, and to evaluate.

Critical Thinking and problem-solving go hand in hand. Make a plan with your child to help her make healthy eating choices and give her a feeling of control in the process.

- **Talk together about the issue.** Don't make your child feel bad about her desire for junk food. Emphasize that healthy eating is important for adults and children. You can say something like: "I am worried that we are eating too much junk food. Let's figure out a plan to help our whole family eat healthy foods."
- **Work together to come up with healthy eating strategies.** Ask your child for her ideas and take them seriously. Breaking the junk food habit works best if you and your child select a substitute for the food she is craving, so ask her what she else she could eat when she wants a something unhealthy. Come up with some substitutes that work for you and her.
- **Choose a strategy and try it out.** See if your child is able to manage her junk food cravings with reminders about the food you are going to substitute for cookies and chips. Talk together to reflect on the strategy and evaluate how it is working. If it isn't, try out another idea.

2

Practice healthy eating at home and on the go.

Children learn what they see and live. Do the best you can to set up an environment where healthy food is a priority.

- Keep healthy snacks on hand, like apples, raisins or other fruits and vegetables. That way, you can have a healthy option available for your child when and if she starts asking for junk food. It is much easier to avoid unhealthy food if it isn't available. Make sure you stock up on the snacks she has chosen as a substitute for cookies and chips.
- Make healthy eating choices for yourself and explain to your child why: "Instead of eating chips for a snack, I'm going to have some carrots. They'll make me feel full and they're crunchy, just like chips." Not only will your child learn from your example, but you will also feel the benefits of eating well, like having more energy.
- If you find your child often asks for junk food at the store, give her something to eat before you leave the house. If you'd like to get your child something at the store, offer her the choice of buying one healthy treat.

3

Make healthy eating fun.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, it is common for preschoolers to go through stages where they only eat one or two types of food or even refuse to eat certain foods altogether. Even though your child may eat only a select number of foods, do your best to continue to offer your child a variety of healthy options. To help her try new foods, try letting your child safely participate in preparing meals and snacks, like pouring and stirring ingredients in a bowl.

Instead of trying to "teach" your child about how bad junk food is, think about how to engage her in making healthy choices. Children learn best when they are really involved, when they have pleasurable experiences in their everyday lives with the people they care about.

- Do some taste tests at snack time or mealtime. Give your child the chance to taste healthy, delicious foods. Tell her to close her eyes and try the foods. Can she guess what they are by smelling or touching them? How do they taste? Crunchy? Sweet? Offer these kinds of options if she wants a snack between meals.
- Strengthen your child's self control in playful ways. Games like Red Light/Green Light, Simon Says, Freeze Dance and Musical Chairs all require your child to remember the rules, think flexibly and control her automatic response..

4

Give your child tools to reflect on what she eats.

Stephanie Carlson of the University of Minnesota has conducted a series of experiments called

Less Is More in which three- and four-year-old children were shown two cups of treats like goldfish crackers, one with two crackers and one with five. The experimenters then introduced a monkey puppet and told the children that the treat on the plate they pointed to would be given to the monkey. The idea is that the children have to point to a smaller number of treats to get the larger amount, a task that relies on the Executive Functions of the brain: the children must do the opposite of what they want to do automatically (point to the most treats) to actually get the most treats. Carlson concludes that children have to learn to step back from the immediate situation in order to obtain a more thoughtful, reflective perspective to guide their thinking and their actions.

In new experiments, Stephanie Carlson has found that children are able to step back and reflect when they use symbols for "less" and "more" rather than seeing the actual treats or if they pretend to be someone else who has really good self control.

- Give your child a choice among snack foods by showing her pictures of the choices rather than the actual foods.
- If your child is craving cookies or chips, ask her how someone she admires, perhaps a character from a book or television show, would manage not to eat them and to eat something else.

Asking questions is another way that your child can use Critical Thinking to get information and form ideas. Encourage your child to ask questions about the things you buy and eat as a family. Answer her questions the best you can, with information she can understand.

- Talk with your child about the ingredients in different foods. You can say things like: "I wonder how much sugar is in this juice?" or "These cookies have lots of sugar in them. We need to find a snack where sugar is less than the fourth ingredient."
- Make grocery lists together. This is a great opportunity for you to talk with your child about what you are buying and why. You can describe where different foods come from, what they are made of and how they help your child grow.
- Point out to your child where she can find the ingredients and nutrition information on food containers. Even if she can't read yet, you are helping her become aware of how to use what she knows to make good decisions.

5

Help your child practice patience.

In a now-classic experiment from the 1960s, Walter Mischel, then at Stanford University and now a professor at Columbia University, conducted what he calls "The Marshmallow Test." Four year olds were taken into a room with a plate that has one marshmallow on one side and two marshmallows on the other. The experimenters told the children that they could have both marshmallows if they waited for the experimenter to return. If they couldn't wait, the children

could ring a bell, but they would only get one marshmallow. Mischel has followed these children, studying them into midlife. He found:

The longer the young children were able to wait at age four, the better the SAT scores, the better the ratings of their ability to control themselves and to pursue their academic and other goals successfully.

Being able to wait requires a lot of self control, for both adults and children. Find times during the day to work on being patient, like in line at the store or at the doctor's. This is good practice for you and your child!

- What fun games can you come up with to pass the time? Try singing songs or telling stories too.
- You can help your child learn to manage her junk food cravings by having a special treat day and marking it off on the calendar. If you do let her have chips or cookies on those days, you can select healthy versions, such as vegetable chips or cookies that have healthy ingredients.

6

Encourage critical viewing skills when reading or watching television.

Talk about the commercials for junk food that you see on television or in ads in magazines. Help your child take a step back and understand that not all of the claims made on television or on the Internet are true. Encourage your child to think about questions like:

- "How does watching this commercial make you feel?"
- "Does this ad make you want this product? Is it the colors, the music or the words?"
- "Do you believe what this commercial is telling you? Will other kids like you more if you drink this soda or are the advertisers just trying to sell sodas?"