



Teaching Children to Make “Healthy Choices”

Empowering children through language



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By Buffington Calvillo, Aurora and Lindsay, Anne

While it is important to teach children to make healthy choices at an early age, the language that adults use to refer to foods is critical. Using intentional language that children can understand is especially important when they have decision-making power, such as when choosing a snack.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

While young children may know and use the term “healthy,” they cannot explain reasons for choosing healthy snacks or from where they get their ideas about health¹. They have a tough time understanding abstract words, such as “healthy².” Simple phrases such as, “this snack is *good* for you” can also be confusing for young children because there is no context for the word “good.” Adults understand terms based on the context in which they are used. For example, the term “good” can be about taste, health or even its perishable quality, depending on its context. Therefore, using the terms “good” and “bad” to describe a snack to a young child should focus only on taste, not nutritional value or health.



The use of terms “healthy” and “unhealthy” can be taught using concrete definitions that are simple for young children.

- *Healthy* foods are foods that “help keep my heart, muscles and bones strong”
- *Unhealthy* foods are foods that “do not help keep my heart, muscles and bones strong, even if they taste good.”



To help children select healthy foods, those that “help keep my heart, muscles and bones strong,” it is recommended that parents and teachers use a modified version of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute’s **GO, SLOW** and **WHOA** food classification system.

Teachers and families can reinforce the messages about “healthy” and “unhealthy” food by repeating these phrases at home and in the classroom. There is a sense of pride and ownership for children when they learn new words such as “healthy” and “unhealthy.” They are then more likely to use these terms to make food choices.



REFERENCES

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