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Spoiling children – treats, takeaways and health



Feedback

It's easy to spoil your kids. You pick up some sweets from the supermarket, get a takeaway on the weekend, bribe them with a doughnut - but it all adds up. We speak to the experts about the health risks and look for better ways to dish out the treats without turning your child into an unhealthy adult.

You love your children and want the best for them, so you give them what they need and want.

The problem is that always saying 'yes' can have unwanted consequences. So how do you get the balance right and offer treats, rewards, incentives and love without spoiling them?

Raising a healthy child

Most new parents set out with good intentions for their little ones' health. These might include not giving them too many sweet things, introducing them to fruit and vegetables and encouraging them to exercise.

All this is very well and good. But actually putting your perfect parenting skills into practice as your child gets older – and more demanding – is a lot harder than you think.

We can all be forgiven for occasionally taking the easy way out. But the trouble is that the more this happens, the quicker the good intentions of early parenthood get forgotten.

Why do we spoil our kids?

There are loads of reasons why we spoil our children. We may use treats as a way to bribe kids to behave well, to distract them from a temper tantrum or as a reward for good behaviour.

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Or we may want to give our children the things we didn't have as a child. Sweets and chocolate might also be dished out because we feel guilty for not giving them enough time or attention.

Bribing children to behave

There are occasions when spoiling children can produce instant results. This helps us justify our actions, rather than looking for better ways to tackle the situation.

Take a tantrum in the supermarket as an example. Your child starts screaming, you can't concentrate, arms are flailing, people are staring and you pick the quick way to calm the situation – reach for the candy bar.

Yes, you may spare yourself the embarrassment of a scene and yes, your child might stop misbehaving. It might seem like the best result all round.

But if this happens every time you leave the house, your child is going to get used to getting what they want and on overindulging on the sweet stuff.

Healthy tips

Although you know how important it is to teach your child healthy habits and behaviour, it can still be difficult to make the right choices in a world filled with fast food and sweets. But it is never too late to change.

Top tips:

- Try replacing the unhealthy snacks with ones you don't mind them eating like fruit, oatcakes and breadsticks.

- Don't cut out bad snacks completely, but only offer them occasionally.
- Offer pure fruit juice instead of fizzy drinks like cola (but just one glass a day). The fruit juice counts towards their five-a-day and will help satisfy cravings for sweet things.
- Encourage your child to drink lots of water rather than fizzy drinks.
- Speak to other people who spoil your children, such as grandma and grandpa. Try suggesting they stock up on healthy treats to give the kids instead.
- If you find the supermarket a challenge and often resort to handing out treats to keep your children busy, stop. Instead involve them in the shop, give them a list of healthy snacks to find on the shelves with the promise of one to eat at the end of the trip.
- Substitute chocolate and sweets with sweet fruits like banana or strawberries.
- Stop offering sweets as a reward for good behaviour. Try using stickers or little toys instead. You could also change the treat itself so it becomes something like an activity or a promise of a day out.

Setting a healthy example

One of the best ways to encourage your child to lead a healthy lifestyle and choose healthier foods is to set a good example. This works best if you do it when your child is young, but it is actually never too late to change your ways.

Takeaways and junk food

Betty and husband Marc, 36, would often order Indian or Chinese takeaways for the family on Friday nights, take the kids out for hamburgers on Saturdays and order popcorn and pic n' mix at the cinema on Sundays.

They also regularly topped up their sugar intake with chocolate from the petrol station when on the school run and let the children pick sugary cereals and cakes for their breakfast each day.

Vanessa Shaw, Head of Dietetics, says: "We all like to give our kids treats and it is all too easy to pick up convenience foods – a bag of crisps, a packet of biscuits, a bar of chocolate.

"But these high-fat, high-salt, high-sugar foods shouldn't be the first choice all the time; go shopping and create your own tasty treat in your own home."

Vanessa's favourite healthy snacks include:

- wholegrain pitta bread filled with hummus and cherry tomatoes
- cheese spread on unsalted oatcakes with cucumber slices
- chopped up fruits
- sticks of carrot, pepper and celery with tomato salsa dip
- peanut butter and watercress on granary bread
- banana and berry smoothies

Getting active with kids

Getting out and about is as important to a child's well-being as what they put in their mouths.

Modern life can be pretty comfy – with televisions, DVDs and computer games all keeping little bottoms firmly seated on the sofa.



It's up to parents to help children get active so they stay healthy, grow properly and use up plenty of energy.

There are lots of things you can do with your children which are fun and free or cheap. You could try going swimming at your local pool, kicking a ball in the park, a visit to the playground or borrowing a friend's dog for a big family walk.

And if you can walk to school, or anywhere else you need to go, then do that instead of taking the car. If it's too far to walk the whole way, try getting the bus but get off one or two stops earlier and walk the last bit.

It's all about making small changes to your life to help your kids be more active and stay healthy.

Take it one step at a time

Getting your child into healthy habits at an early age can have huge benefits right through their life. It will protect them against disease, keep them trim and stop them living off junk food when they leave home.

The rewards from a few simple changes to your diet can be massive. Take it one step at a time and try to have fun – neither you nor your child should see healthy eating as a chore.

Re-evaluating the idea of a treat will help – your two-year-old might enjoy scoffing chocolate now, but they won't think you've done them any favours when they are 16, overweight and unhealthy.

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