

# The Semi-Sweet Life

## Fostering Joy While Managing Childhood Obesity & Diabetes: Tips for the newly diagnosed

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We all view life through a unique lens that is formed from our own unique experiences. Parents who are not raising kids with chronic illness may view the milestones and celebrations of their special-needs peers as “bittersweet.” After speaking to a number of veteran parents who do have children that battle chronic illness, I have found one thing in common with them all. They continue to embrace the sweetness of childhood while fighting for well-being. While extra responsibilities can sometimes weigh heavy on the shoulders of special-needs parents, they know they must stay grounded as nurturers while remaining inspired to celebrate.

### BUT HOW?

#### RELAX & REFLECT

We start by taking deep breaths. This has been a stressful time. The journey ahead may also look daunting. Just remember; your special child was given a special parent and that is **YOU!** Give yourself a little time and space to process all of the clinical directives and possible outcomes. Give yourself a little time to privately grieve. Yes, grieve. You will be making changes and you will be continuously saying goodbye to things you don't expect. When you honor the process of grief, it isn't admitting that you think less of your child's overall potential when you consider their medical prognosis and the changes ahead. Sure, they may have lifelong challenges that will require them to live life a little differently than you had hoped. Take another deep breath, and as you inhale, focus on your child **thriving**. Focus on your personal strengths. As you exhale, think of your breath carrying away any broken expectations and the tension in your shoulders. Certainly, your child's daily needs have changed since diagnosis. Some things in life may not be possible as you had hoped. Let those things go. It won't be easy at first, but the more that you focus on new lifestyle directives by embracing creativity and positivity, it will get easier, faster. Once you let go of what may not be possible, you will find that you will have more space for **new hopes and dreams**. Once you let go of the grief and the tension, your body will have more resource to fight for well-being. Making space for your new life by simply welcoming it is amazingly healing. It will allow you to see your child's new trajectory as different, and not “less than.” Keep breathing and focus on seeing both you and child happy & healthy. You're already onto the next step!

## REFRAME

We must be diligent about shifting our paradigms away from limitation and into expansion. For instance, when it comes to setting lifestyle and nutritional goals for kids who are managing obesity and diabetes, we could easily focus on the threat of refined sugar and how we must vehemently fight against it on all fronts. But doesn't that speak to a perspective of limitation and strife? I think we can all agree that it is absolutely necessary to monitor, reduce, and in some cases- possibly eliminate refined sugar intake. Indeed, that can seem bittersweet. Suddenly, the lollipops and juice-boxes feel like landmines instead of icons of childhood bliss. So let's shift away from the void that we feel when we think of "banning" sugar. Doesn't living a **"Semi-Sweet"** life sound far more empowering? When we eliminate the things that no longer serve our needs, there is more space for new tools that we can use to thrive. When we fully face and embrace our adversities, it makes it harder for words like "bittersweet" to enter into conversations about our kids; or really anything else.

Another example is the concept of "losing weight." When our bodies lose unnecessary fat, what do our bodies gain? We gain mobility and sometimes become more muscular. We gain joy from experiences that we might not otherwise have. Try to focus on weekly goals that will help get your child to the best weight for their health. For instance, choose a VOW: "vegetable of the week." Pick one that is in season and one that has a lower carbohydrate and glycemic load. Tell your child that the "Vow" for the week is learning as much about what minerals and vitamins the vegetable supplies. Then make tasty meals for the whole family incorporating the "Vow." Ready for the next step?

## MAKE IT A FAMILY AFFAIR

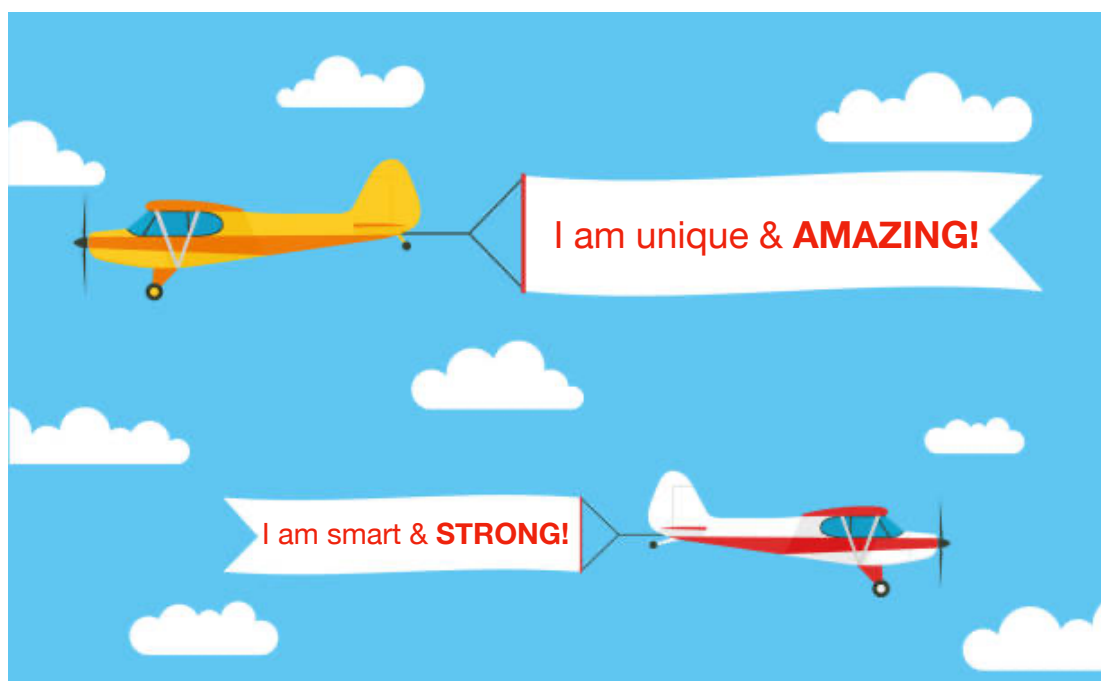
While I have never been a parent- I have, indeed, been a kid. In fact, I was an obese kid who displayed the physical anomalies and the burdening emotions that set me apart from other children. I recall being on "diets" during different times of my life. I remember having to eat a limited menu while everyone else got to enjoy yummy foods that I was not permitted to have. My parents had the best of intentions, but this was incredibly isolating and counter-productive. I felt the heaviness of my body being illuminated each time a meal was planned. Rather than feeling empowered by the actions my parents took to limit the amount or types of food I consumed, I felt ashamed and rejected. If your child is battling obesity or diabetes they need your support by you eating the same way. Children learn best from **your example**; and inclusion within the family unit is mandatory. Sure, at first the conversion away from fast-food and sugary processed items will be difficult. You might even notice that you are actually addicted to certain things that you didn't realize. For instance, many folks tell me the hardest thing to give up are soft-drinks. Why? The combination of sugar, or sugar-substitute with caffeine is a ninja-kick to your frontal lobe! Your taste receptors are getting the influence of sweet, which garners pleasure and signals to your body, "Yes, more of that, please!" Caffeine is a stimulant that signals to your body, "Yes, I can do more!" You might find that after two weeks of cleaner eating, your body signals differently when you take in whole-food nutrition without the chemical triggers. Don't fret. Eating healthy can be **delicious**, and your entire family will have better health overall. You may decide to have "date nights" with siblings who you choose to allow ice-cream sundaes on occasion. Yet, overall, the family dinner table should be consistent and clean.

## MAKE NEW TRADITIONS

Let's use the example of a birthday party as a backdrop. Traditionally, we enjoy cake and ice-cream; and sometimes it follows a celebratory meal of hot-dogs and pizza. Bags of potato chips and bowls of candy are usually in abundance. How can you tell your child that they cannot have any of these items? **You just simply don't.** When you reinforce a restriction, you are only giving negative power to the item or habit that you want to limit. Instead, carry that burden for them and persist in positive change. Your child doesn't need to be constantly reminded of their limitations, but they should be educated and aware of their new responsibilities in making sure that their body stays healthy and strong. Monitor and correct behaviors that are harmful, but lead with entrusting your child to make good food choices.

One tradition that parents can initiate is one that doesn't have to be communicated to the child. That new tradition should be to plan and eat a fiber-rich, high-protein meal within an hour of departure for the party. If your child's capacity for food intake has been met by **nourishing**, high-volume proteins and vegetables, their satiety will render good outcomes. Your child might boast, "Thanks, but I ate already, and my Mom made my favorite meal!" Hand-fuls of candy might easily become just a piece or two. When a child feels happy and satisfied, they are less prone to choosing food in excess and will focus on enjoying their friends and activities. It's not to say that you don't intervene if your child does indulge. Remind them that their body needs to stay strong and healthy instead of admonishing them for their intake.

Another tradition is to teach your child that when sharing birthday cake, they should wait and allow everyone else to be served ahead of them; and that they should request a small piece from the center of the cake. It teaches your child humility and kindness when you explain that the outside pieces and designs made from icing should be reserved for the guests of honor. You don't have to tell them that it's also to help limit their refined sugar intake. Try to keep the focus of new traditions anchored in teaching your child to be the best version of themselves they can be; in every way. This will foster a strong character and spirit within your child. It will help them build self-esteem, rather than feeling overshadowed by constant clouds reminding them of their special needs. Allow the themes of your new traditions to remain hopeful and happy. Confident kids are healthy kids; in body, mind and spirit.



## MAKE GOOD FOOD FUN !

There will be well-qualified nutritionists and counselors available to you throughout your wellness-journey. Their specialized training will focus on the chemistries, compositions and calorie counts of your child's daily menus. It's your job to make it fun! Here are some ways to make mealtime fun and satisfying for the whole family!



**Incorporate different textures, temperature and flavors.** Drawing from the traditions of Ayurveda (Ancient Indian Medicine), you should include opposing elements to render maximum satisfaction from your meals. For instance, if you prepare a cold salad, pair it with a hot soup. Use both sweet vegetable and fruits in moderation and pair them with salty or stringent items like greek yogurt. The more that you can incorporate the range of tastes and textures the better!



**Use your hands!** Teaching your child formal dining etiquette is wonderful. At the same time, we don't always benefit from a fork and spoon. Handheld wraps and other foods that are eaten with the hands not only speak to the freedom of childhood, but they can also help kids to foster a tactile awareness of the food that they are consuming. They can better identify the density and weight of the food by touching it. Many studies show a link between eating with the hands and food satiety.



**Put a rainbow in your plate!** Strive to put every color of the spectrum into your meal. A great way to get color and extra vegetable fiber is to use bell-pepper strips of red, orange, yellow and green. Use a purple onion for raw consumption. Find a beautifully decorative blue bowl and add a side of blueberries. Voila! Not only have you made a rainbow, but you have also helped your child's brain develop a neurochemical appreciation for nutritious foods! Bright colors register with the brain's primal reflexes that signal abundance.



**Play Favorites!** Have each member of your family list their favorite foods and meal ideas. Incorporate some of the items that everyone loves into every family meal when you can. Use this as an opportunity for your kids to draw and craft, and make food charts and menus. Do you have favorite family recipes that you don't want to give up? Don't. Just learn how to replace unhealthy ingredients for substitutions that serve up less saturated fat and less sugar. Learn how to incorporate your favorite spices and calorie-free sauces to make every meal pop.

As you know, this new lifestyle is going to take some extra time and advance planning- but you've got this! If I can be of assistance to you in helping convert your feelings of overwhelm back into a blissful and healthy observation of childhood, please be in touch!

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