

A Healthy and Happy Childhood

Local programs show kids that eating healthier and becoming more active is not only good for them, but also fun.

By Julie Engelhardt

Getting kids to maintain a healthy lifestyle can be challenging for parents today. Instead of going outside to ride their bikes or run and play when there's down time, children tend to plop down on the couch to play videogames or watch TV. Or when hunger pangs hit, they'll likely choose a can of soda and a bag of chips for a snack, instead of water or an apple.

With so many not-so-healthy options easily available to kids, parents often labor over how they can turn these behaviors around before it's too late. The last thing they want to see is their kids facing high blood pressure, heart disease, Type II diabetes or other health problems that usually do not occur until much later in life.

Dr. Jamie Wallach, a pediatrician who founded **Bay Area Committed to Kids** in San Jose, deals with children's weight problems on a daily basis. She tackles the weight gain issue by not only focusing on the child, but also working with the parents. "We are dedicated to educating the whole family and teaching them how to have healthier lifestyles," she explains. "The most successful treatment is a family-based approach by incorporating a moderate lifestyle change."

Wallach says this method is in sharp contrast to societal attitudes over the past 20 or 30 years with respect to weight loss. "People have heard they need to diet and restrict what they eat, but they often have a difficult time keeping it up, so they go back to their old habits. If we can help [the family] identify small changes that [can be worked] into their current lifestyle, they'll become successful." Some of these changes, she adds, are as simple as turning off the TV, or going out for a walk or bike ride once a week, with the intent of making it a regular part of your family's routine.

To some parents, teaching their kids about proper nutrition may seem like a daunting task, but it doesn't have to be. At Willow Glen kids cooking school **Cucina Bambini**, which opened in April 2008, teaching children about making healthy choices is a big priority. "It is really getting out of hand," says manager Heather Hicks of the rise of diet-related illnesses such as Type II diabetes. The center's cooking classes aim to make students aware of the hidden fats and sugars in many foods. "We do show them a lot of substituting," says Hicks. Not only do they use more nutritious alternatives, such as applesauce instead of sugar and flavorful herbs in place of salt, they feel that children who learn to cook at a young age are bound for a healthier life. "I think what you grow up doing is what you tend to do and teach when you are an adult. These are life lessons and life skills," says Hicks. "I really, really believe that giving them experiences with fresh fruits and vegetables is going to last them their whole life."

Jill Litwin is also helping kids to eat better. Owner of **Peas of Mind** in San Francisco, she created "puffets," frozen single-serve meals that are great for children ages one to seven. Litwin likens puffets to mini casseroles that contain the four food groups. Their carrot risotto puffet, for example, has organic whole milk for calcium, eggs for protein and Omega 3, organic carrots and sweet potatoes for the vitamins and veggies, and boiled rice for the grains.

"Our goal is to feed our kids better today and to do whatever it takes to make it easier for the parents," Litwin says. "People are working longer hours and the commute is longer. We have foods for us that are convenient and healthy, but there's been nothing out there for the kids. Now there is."

