

June 16, 2011 - The annual fight has begun for influence over your kids' summer eating habits.

In one corner: You and your crisp combos of nutrition knowledge, encouragement and control over what goes on the family dining table. In the other corner: spotty peer influences, ample opportunities for snacking away from home and a junk food marketing industry that bombards kids with an average of more than 11,000 TV ads a year.

It sounds like a rigged fight, and to some extent it is. But before you drop your gloves and step out of the ring, take heart. Here are some strategies that'll help you punch far above your weight class.

Lead with a good example. A recent study found marked differences between the results of the authoritarian approach to nutrition influence ("You're not leaving the table until you finish your peas!") and the authoritative style (putting your nutrition rules in a context of earned respect, concern and, equally important, practicing what you preach).

Not surprisingly, the authoritative approach worked much better -- and helped explain why "role model" strikes most folks as a more positive description than "drill instructor."

Involve kids in meal preparation. Celebrity chefs are hot these days, and children enjoy high-energy, competition-based food TV shows such as "Chopped," "Throwdown" and "Iron Chef America." Watch these programs with your kids, then challenge them to help you reproduce some of the dishes. Or let them compete against each other for family bragging rights.

It's fun with lasting benefits. Research suggests that learning to cook encourages children to try different foods and to eat more slowly to savor their meals -- a behavior that reduces overeating. Another positive effect: Kids who spend more time in kitchens than convenience stores also tend to lose their taste for processed fast food.

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Allow -- but restrict and redefine -- snacking. Declaring snacks off limits to your children all but guarantees they'll be loading up on junk when you're not around. The smarter approach is to allow snacking in the home, but only at certain times and in limited quantities. You also can minimize the caloric hits by offering healthier alternatives such as homemade ice cream sweetened with fruit.

Watermelon, bananas, grapes, plums and tangerines all are sweet, easy to eat and appealing to most children. Yogurt-based fruit smoothies also score well as milkshake alternatives. And many nuts, such as almonds and pistachios, make up for high fat content by delivering lots of protein, fiber and vitamin E.

Encourage summer sports participation. Physical activity is an indispensable companion to good nutrition for children. It builds self-confidence, encourages socialization and can speed up fat-burning metabolic activity. Most communities have summer sports leagues for children of all ages. Encourage your children to participate, and attend as many of their games as you can.

Afterward, steer them away from the empty caloric recharge of fast food. To a ravenous young ballplayer or gymnast, lean barbecue brisket with snap peas, corn on the cob and fruit juice can be (almost) as appealing as a cheeseburger, fries and shake. Early sports participation and other fitness activities also instill lifelong habits they're likely to pass along to their children.

Take advantage of available Summer Nutrition Programs. In many Texas communities, families can stretch their limited dollars and improve their kids' nutrition during the summer with free meals programs sponsored locally by school districts, summer camps, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and other organizations. For more information, go to the Texas Department of Agriculture's www.summerfood.org page. You can also dial 2-1-1 to find a nearby Summer Nutrition Program or other available meals programs for children.

Can these strategies deliver a final knockout blow to junk food temptation? Probably not. But they will help you keep your kids out of the heavyweight class this summer and in fighting trim for years to come.

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