

Opinion: Letting children serve food may help curb obesity issues

By Kayla Johnson

September is Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, and University of Nevada Cooperative Extension nutrition experts are urging parents to let their children serve themselves as a way to prevent overeating.

In Nevada, almost a third of children entering kindergarten are overweight or obese, according to UNCE nutrition experts. But there are ways to keep those statistics from increasing, and the effort should start at home, according to Madeleine Sigman-Grant, a University of Nevada Cooperative Extension maternal specialist.

One solution, Sigman-Grant said, is for parents to encourage self-serving.

It is common for parents to tell their child to clean their plate, but many children are being asked to eat more than they need, Sigman-Grant said. Allowing children to serve themselves helps keep portion sizes under control, Sigman-Grant said.

Self-serving is an important skill for young children as they learn to adjust their food intake to their energy needs. Doing so helps them make connections between serving and their eating cues. It also involves the development of motor skills such as holding utensils, passing food, using good manners and learning to share.

“Self-serving makes a preschool child a part of the family,” Sigman-Grant said. “They are doing something that their older siblings and parents are doing. They have the opportunity to

take control over the amount they eat.”

Sigman-Grant considers self-serving a “messy” process, but the end goal is to get the child to become self-sufficient.

“In the beginning when the child first starts self-serving they will probably take too much,” Sigman-Grant said. “That is when the parent or the child-care provider comes in to alert the child how much they really need to eat and how hungry the child is. Within a week or two the child will adjust because it gives them control. There is no way a parent can tell how hungry a child is, so self-serving is a self-help tool and is another part of the child growing up.”

One worry for many parents who are hesitant to implement self-serving is that their child will not serve themselves enough and will not have the right kind of food.

“Getting enough food is something a lot of parents worry about because the rate of growth is very slow in toddlers and preschoolers compared to when they were infants so they don’t need as much food,” Sigman-Grant said. “If you offer healthy foods with a lot of variety in small meals then there should be no worries.”

While self-serving can be messy and frustrating, it is beneficial for both the child and parents.

“The pride a parent feels in a child accomplishing a skill can never be underestimated,” Sigman-Grant said.

Tips:

- Encourage children to serve themselves.
- Do not insist that children finish all of the food on their plates.
- Let your child serve one part of the meal –for instance, a pasta dish one day, and a vegetable side dish the next.

- Have your child say “when” as foods are being portioned to allow to have a role in how much they would like to eat.
- Avoid praising a clean plate. Allow children to decide how much is eaten.
- Talk to children about how their stomach feels before, during, and after the meal.
- Help the child and support the child as the child is taking the food.
- Trust your child to eat the amount that is right for him or her.
- Pay attention to portion size: If the first serving is small, a second will be OK. Don't eat out of cartons. Use kid-size cups and plates.
- Provide healthy food choices and then let kids learn how to rely on their own hunger and fullness cues.

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