

Kids' diets and screen time: To set up good habits, make healthy choices the default at home

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The availability of junk foods and screens is increasingly creating challenges for parents.

But in the [home environment](#), parents have the opportunity to shape their [children's](#) diet, activity, screen [time](#) and health. This includes managing the foods they eat and the activities available to them—and the expectations around these.

We know [early childhood is a key time](#) to influence and establish health-related behaviors, so this is important right from the beginning.

Although it can be hard to think about the longer term impacts of meals and screen time during the early years, setting in place a few key healthy and sustainable practices could save a lot of effort and conflict in the long run.

That being said, making changes to your family routine is possible at any time.

Setting up healthy family practices and expectations

The Australian government has guidelines around [healthy eating, physical activity and screen time](#) for children to promote optimal health and development. The recommendations vary by age group, but essentially encourage a balanced diet, plenty of movement, and limited screen time.

Taking these guidelines into account, healthy routines can include:

- **creating screen-free mealtimes.** Eating snacks or meals while watching TV results in children consuming [more sweet drinks and junk foods, and fewer fruits and vegetables](#), likely due to junk food advertising, mindless eating, and increased snacking. Turning off screens and [focusing on family meal times](#) can help even very young children learn about socialising
- **eating meals as a family, with everyone eating the same food.** Evidence suggests [parents' eating and role-modeling](#) are important influences on children's food intakes. Eating together [at any meal or snack time](#) lets parents role-model eating and enjoying healthy foods. It also enables parents to set expectations around eating—like encouraging children to eat to their appetite, rather than to finish their plate
- **switching off the TV/screen and setting screen time limits.** It can be easy to get into the habit of turning the TV on before breakfast or after dinner every day, or leaving it on when a show is finished. But "background TV" [reduces childrens' attention spans during playtime](#) and [lowers the quality of parent-child interactions](#). Although it might sound obvious, setting

[screen time rules](#) will reduce children's time in front of the screen. Try setting a screen time limit, having one or two screen-free days per week (this includes the whole family), or only allowing recreational screen time on weekends

- **structuring regular family activities around physical activity rather than screen time.** Although watching TV shows and movies together is recommended to help children understand what they're seeing, it can unintentionally ingrain [screen time](#) habits as normal family practice. Try replacing things like watching a movie together with a family bike ride or an outing to the park. This is an easy way to [reduce overall screen time](#), and parents and young children who participate in physical activity together are [more active all round](#).

Out of sight, out of mind

Another strategy is to set up your home environment so it encourages healthy behaviours, and minimises temptations for unhealthy ones. For example:

- **having active play equipment (like balls, bats, and bikes) readily available to children.** Among older children, having easier access to equipment within their home [prompts more physical activity](#). Providing lots of different types of equipment, which can be borrowed or shared between families, is even better
- **having screen-free bedrooms, and putting electronic devices out of sight in living areas.** Having a TV in the room where a child sleeps, not surprisingly, results in children [watching more TV](#) and creates another thing parents need to police. By removing the cues to engage in these behaviours, children are less likely to want to participate in them
- **filling your fridge and pantry with foods you want your child and family to eat.** The foods available at home are associated with children's [diet quality](#). Fresh fruit, cut vegetables, yoghurt, cheese, wholegrain breads and unsweetened breakfast cereals

are good choices. Limiting junk [food](#) in the home means children simply have to choose between healthy options.

Making big changes to family routine can seem overwhelming, so starting with something achievable from wherever your family is at can make the changes more manageable for everyone.

Try nominating one screen-free day, having one additional family meal, or planning one additional outdoor [family](#) activity per week—and then build on your success.

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