Quick tips to help kids eat well

While children need nutrients to grow, learn, play and stay healthy, getting them to eat healthy food can be

e in a little imagination and a few clever strategies.

Start with breakfast

Breakfast gets kids going again after a long night without food and may help them do better in school.

Easy to prepare breakfasts include cold cereal (the not-so-sugary kind) with fruit and milk, whole wheat toast or bagels with peanut butter or whole grain waffles with yoghurt. But breakfast doesn't have to be traditional. Consider the leftovers in the fridge. If you have spaghetti sauce, for example, spoon some on a whole-wheat bagel, top with cheese and heat in a toaster oven. Add a glass of juice and you have a complete breakfast.

Another useful strategy is to keep fresh fruit in the fridge so your children can reach for it in the morning. Bananas, strawberries and melons are great tasting fruits that many children enjoy, and they're high in vitamins and fibre.

Plan for balance

The keys to healthy eating are variety, moderation and balance. Teaching children healthy eating habits can help reduce the risk of weight-related problems later in life.

Serve lots of grains, fruits and vegetables. These foods give children carbohydrates for energy, plus essential vitamins, minerals and fibre. Experiment with breads—try whole grain bagels, pitas and wraps. Pasta and oatmeal are also in the grain group. Try whole-wheat or rice pasta for a change, make an activity of it and bake oatmeal muffins with your kids.

Encourage your children to help you plan a week's worth of healthy, balanced meals for the family. Fast food can have a place too—just not every day!

Smart snacks

Choose snacks from different food groups—a glass of low-fat milk and some graham crackers, an apple or celery sticks with peanut butter, a bowl of dry cereal with strawberries or apples slices on top are all great options that they just might gobble up.

Give them a small bowl of trail mix, dried fruit, nuts or sunflower seeds to dip into when they get home from school. Keeping peeled and sliced raw fruits and vegetables in the fridge, along with low-fat cream cheese and dips gives you a quick, ready option for healthy snacking.

Be creative

Try making food fun. Some easy, fun tricks include:

- Topping a complete meal with nuts and carrots to make a funny face
- Adding green or red food colouring to a low-fat creamy dressing
- Adding fruit in unexpected places—fresh peach slices with pork, strawberries or chopped pears in salads, or mango as a side to chicken and vegetables

Encourage your children to add their own ideas. Try searching online for recipes that are fun and easy to make with kids at different ages and stages.

Get the whole family involved

Children are more likely to eat food they have helped prepare. To get them started, consider:

- Buying a children's recipe book and help them choose meals to make together
- Asking older children to make supper one night a week
- Setting an example by eating the right foods and having regular meal times together
- Making meal times an occasion and avoid distractions such as television

Children need a wide variety of vitamins, minerals, fibre and protein to grow healthy and strong. Variety is key, and a good principle to keep in mind as you plan meals. Try to ensure that your children eat a variety of foods every day by following Canada's Food Guide and some of these fun tips.