

# HOW I GOT MY KID TO BE HEALTHY



STOP WORRYING ABOUT WHETHER YOU'RE INSTILLING GOOD WELLNESS HABITS AND TRY SOME OF THESE TRICKS TO END FIGHTS OVER JUNK FOOD, BEDTIME BATTLES AND MORE.

*By Michele Bender*

**PHOTOGRAPH BY DARRELL EAGER**

Kids who live in neighborhoods with easy access to junk food eat it more often.

...

Most teens don't get the recommended 8 to 10 hours of rest per night.

...

Daily soda drinking increases your risk of type 2 diabetes.

**W**hen our pediatrician asked about my 13-year-old daughter's diet last month, as a health writer, I couldn't wait to boast: Avocados are her favorite food, she doesn't like sweets and she's had only one soda in her entire life. That's when I was served a slice of humble pie: "Lily doesn't get enough calcium," the pediatrician noted. To say I was embarrassed is an understatement. To say I wasn't surprised would be quite accurate. Lily doesn't like

milk, turns up her nose at yogurt and pushes broccoli right off the plate. Getting her to eat calcium-rich foods has been an exhausting uphill battle—one I'd initially given up years ago. And I'm not alone. Plenty of great moms let good intentions go awry with kids who stay up too late or endlessly munch on junk food. But we don't have to. With some creativity (Greek yogurt pancakes) and an intro to kale, I helped Lily change her calcium tune. See how three other women went from wimpy moms to well-being warriors courtesy of a little perspective-shifting advice from our experts.

## "My son won't go near produce!"

**Melissa Berman** just can't get her 13-year-old, Max, to touch fruits or veggies. Instead, he eats doughnuts, pizza or ice cream while walking home from school with friends. "Once, they went to the movie theater just to buy corn dogs," says this New York City mother of two. "They weren't even seeing a movie." Melissa was racked with guilt over her kid's junk food habit until she heard this: "You can't really control a teenager's food choices when he's out," says Lisa Young, RD, adjunct professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University and author of *The Portion Teller Plan*. "Instead, focus on what he eats at home." Once Melissa bagged the guilt, she used these tips to make produce progress with Max.

**Trick them with texture.** Mimic chips and dip by serving cut-up veggies and hummus or guacamole at home. "Opt for juicy, crunchy jicama or sweet orange, yellow or red peppers," suggests Young. Steamed or baked asparagus sprinkled with Parmesan satisfies savory cravings. "Though I had to put them out a few times, Max eventually tried and liked the veggies because they still had the satisfying crunch and flavor," says Melissa.

**Sweeten the pot.** Try whipping up a smoothie with frozen fruit. Spread frozen banana slices with peanut butter or dip them in chocolate sauce and roll them in sprinkles. "Even simple frozen grapes and blueberries satisfy a sweet tooth," adds Young. So can dried fruit. Think beyond ho-hum raisins and opt for dried tropical treats like pineapple or mango. "Even though plain fruits didn't tempt my son, he eagerly ate the frozen bananas," Melissa says.



*Our mom tester made her son feel like he was eating chips and dip with much healthier but still-crunchy alternatives.*

**Get ready to mingle.** "Mix foods your child already likes with healthy ones," suggests Young. For example, stir-fry steak (which Max loves) with a frozen medley of broccoli, corn and peppers. Or add veggies to his favorite soups. "I thought Max would pick out the veggies, but he actually ate them because they had the same flavor as the meat," says Melissa.

## “My son drinks too much soda!”

**Lonni Farina** is proud that her 16-year-old is a hardworking high school basketball player. But she’s not particularly proud of his sugary-drink habit. “Sometimes Ty has soda first thing in the morning. And on weekends and in the summer he’ll have at least three cans a day,” says this mom of two from Monroe, CT. “At the drive-thru, he’ll get an extra-large soda. At the movies, it’s a Slush Puppie.” Though he’s fit and slim, this isn’t healthy. “One can of soda can have 10 to 12 teaspoons of sugar,” says nutritionist and diabetes educator Deborah Malkoff-Cohen, RD, founder of City Kids Nutrition in New York City. “Not only is this bad for his teeth and liver, but excess sugar puts you at risk for weight gain and diabetes.” Ty is now sipping healthier thanks to Lonni’s new strategies.

**Shift the focus.** “Motivate your child with something that matters to him,” says Malkoff-Cohen. Because Ty cares about his body when it comes to sports, explaining how soda’s sugar and



*This surprising swap has far less sugar than the regular morning beverage of choice for our tester’s son.*



chemicals affect him was helpful. “We talked about sugar being linked to obesity and therefore cancer,” says Lonni. “This hit home since we have two good friends battling cancer.” That night Ty asked for water with dinner instead of soda.

**Fizz it yourself.** “Add flavor to seltzer or a SodaStream drink,” says Malkoff-Cohen. “Playing around with concoctions or finding online recipes can be a fun experiment.” Making your own fizzy beverages is also healthier and less expensive. Because Ty loves Dr Pepper, Lonni stirred up seltzer with her SodaStream and added two ounces of vanilla soda and a drop of cherry juice. “He thought it was okay, but more than that, it was great for us to consider an alternative that could become a healthy favorite,” says Lonni.

**Make a smarter swap.** Because he’s drinking soda throughout the day, Ty isn’t sleeping well at night and Malkoff-Cohen suspects he’s using soda as a pick-me-up in the morning. Instead, she suggests he get his jolt from java (which Ty also drinks) because the Dr Pepper Cherry Vanilla he loves has 63 grams of sugar (16 teaspoons) in a 20-ounce bottle. “A cup of coffee with 2 to 3 teaspoons of sugar is the lesser of two evils. If he sticks to one cup, it’s fine even though he’s a teen,” says Malkoff-Cohen. Ty liked having coffee in the morning with a little sweet cream.



## “My daughter will not go to sleep!”

Getting her two kids to eat healthy foods is tough even for dietitian **Julie Laffer**. But the real challenge is getting her 10-year-old to bed. “She fights me when I say it’s bedtime and wants to stay up late to play games on the iPad or watch TV,” says this mom from Los Angeles. “It’s exhausting!” Unfortunately, what happens at night spills over into the a.m., making it difficult for Julie to get Maya out of bed. “For children, the deep stage of sleep is especially important because it’s when growth hormone surges and physical maturation happens,” explains internist and sleep medicine specialist Amy Aronsky, DO, medical director for CareCentrix in Hartford, CT. Julie found peace at bedtime with this sound advice.

**Revise their routine.** The majority of electronic devices (e-readers, tablets, computers and TVs) emit a blue light that sends a wake-up signal to the brain and prevents natural sleep. “Turn electronics off two hours before bed to allow the brain to wind down and prepare for lights-out,” suggests Aronsky. Ideally, opt for a paper book, and if your child must pick one device, TV is best because we sit farther away from its blue light than we do from tablets, phones or e-readers. “It was hard to get Maya to read an actual book, but she did watch TV instead of the iPad so it’s a start,” says Julie.

**Clear the clutter.** Even when Maya snoozes, her bed is often home to her favorite things—a piano keyboard, markers, dolls, brushes, portable electronics. Unfortunately, this keeps her bed from being a sleep sanctuary. “Clutter on the bed can be another distraction, cause discomfort and limit good rest,” says Aronsky. “The night Maya cleared off her covers, she slept longer, but two days later it was back,” says Julie. “Still, this is definitely something good we’ll be working on.”

**Track her zzz’s.** Aronsky suggested Maya keep two journals: a “worry journal,” where she’d dump the things swirling in her mind before she hits the sack, and another for tracking her sleep/wake schedule, recording her energy level and noting how she feels in the morning. Maya actually found tracking her sleep fun. “And I liked it because it inspired her to argue less about going to bed,” says Julie.