

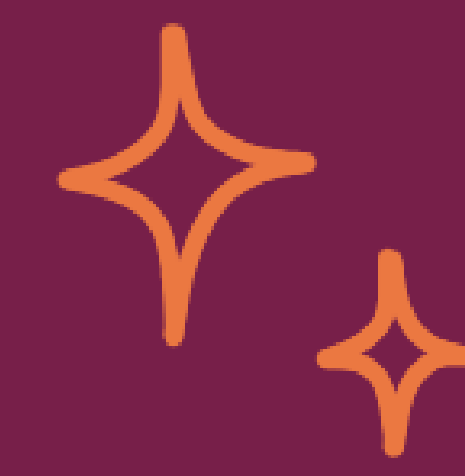


TECH/LIFE BALANCE:
HELPING FAMILIES THRIVE IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Nourishing Mind and Body Family Guide



California Partners
PROJECT



This guide offers three practical tools to help you protect and strengthen the most important factor of all: your connection with the kids in your life.

Introduction

From recipe hacks to influencer body transformations, kids today grow up surrounded by digital messages around food, health, and body image. These messages can spark creativity—or create confusion and anxiety about what’s “healthy” and how kids “should” look.

As parents and caregivers, we play a powerful role in helping kids navigate these messages. We can guide them to question unrealistic ideals, build confidence in their own choices, and foster a healthy relationship with food and their bodies.



"Technology influences nearly every aspect of our kids' lives—including how they perceive and relate to food, nutrition, physical health, well-being, and body image. As parents and caregivers, we can help our kids build the skills and confidence they need to navigate the ever-changing digital messages around food, health, and body image. One conversation, one meaningful meal at a time, we can guide our kids towards balance, and this resource offers the tools to get started."

Jennifer Siebel Newsom, First Partner of California & Co-Founder of the California Partners Project

Who Is This Guide For?

Whether you're a parent, grandparent, teacher, coach, or trusted friend, you help shape kids' habits around food, bodies, and tech. California kids come from many cultures, traditions, and circumstances, and there's no single "right" way to support healthy choices. These tools can help you find what works best for your family or community.

Start with Yourself

Before you can guide the kids in your life, it helps to pause and reflect on your own relationships with food, your body, and technology. The way we see ourselves and how we behave often shapes how our kids perceive themselves.



Questions to Ask Yourself

What messages about food or bodies did I grow up with, and how might those still influence me?

Do I sometimes feel guilt or stress about what I eat, or how I look—and could kids be picking up on that?

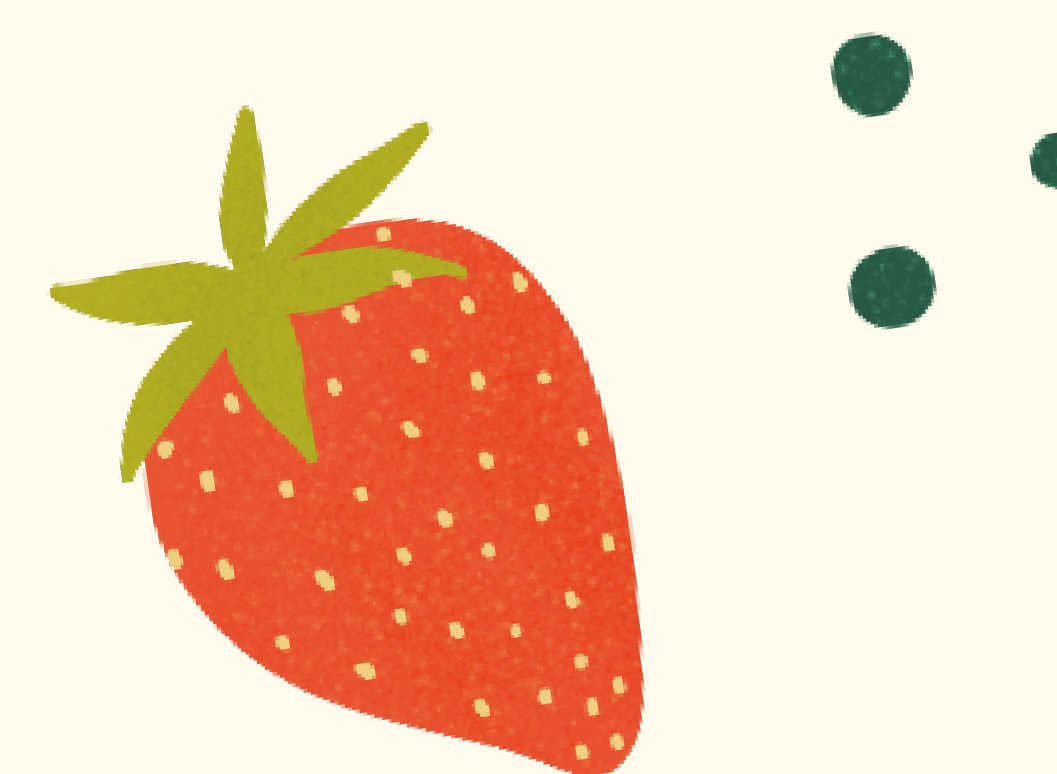
Have I noticed myself influenced by media or ads about dieting, exercise, or appearance?

Do I believe certain foods are “good” or “bad,” and how might those beliefs affect how I talk with kids?



When we reflect on our own beliefs and experiences, we're better prepared to support kids in navigating the digital messages they face every day.

Naming What You're Worried About



Once you've reflected on your own experiences, the next step is to notice the pressures kids may be facing. Digital messages about food, bodies, and health show up differently depending on a child's age, gender, and interests.

These guiding questions can help you identify what might be showing up in kids' lives—and what feels most urgent for you to address.

Poor Eating Habits

- ☐ Are they eating unhealthy foods or snacking more often because of what they see advertised online or in videos?
- ☐ Do they know how to listen to their own hunger and fullness cues—or are those signals getting drowned out?
- ☐ Are they starting to label foods as "good" or "bad," and feel like they have to "earn" their food or burn off calories for eating certain things?
- ☐ Are they trying to eat huge amounts of food to "bulk up," because they believe that's what it means to be strong?
- ☐ Are they starting to skip meals, restrict food, or hide what they're eating based on what they see online?

"They see it on the Internet, and that leads to...consuming more soda instead of water, eating junk food, and burgers... They think life is a drive-thru."

Grandparent of three

"Anything that they see online ends up in our house and their body at some point."

Father of two tweens

Body Image Pressures

- ☐ Do they compare themselves to people online and feel like their own body isn't good enough?
- ☐ Are they feeling pressure to be thin—or feeling pressure to bulk up?
- ☐ Are you noticing signs of body insecurity at an early age?
- ☐ Are they overly focused on their looks, spending lots of time worrying about appearance, checking mirrors, or using filters before posting online?

**FROM THE
RESEARCH**

Three out of four teens and young adults struggle with how they feel about their bodies, and boys are increasingly affected by pressures to achieve a muscular physique.

“My 12-year-old... He has a morning routine of doing pull-ups, and he goes on YouTube to get an exercise routine. He does it at night too—he does it two times a day. He has this notion of being strong.”

Mother of two tween boys

“Body image is mostly with my girls and social media. They know it's fake but still get influenced by it because that's what they're seeing...They wanna try stuff that they see on social media...And [they] know that some of those products aren't good for them at all.”

Mother of four tweens and teens

“Seeing what's constantly posted on social media made her anxious about her body.”

Mother of teen girl

Influencer Messages & Risky Trends

- ☐ Are they trying diet or food trends they've seen online that promise quick weight loss or involve extreme rules?
- ☐ Do they trust influencers' health advice or buy products like supplements and protein powders without realizing it's marketing or understanding the risks?
- ☐ Are they comparing themselves to highly filtered photos, highlight reels, or AI-generated influencers who don't even exist?
- ☐ Are they picking up casual advice about dieting, muscle-building, or cutting weight from gaming streams, sports content, or fitness YouTubers?
- ☐ Do they see influencers as friends or role models, without realizing they're being marketed to?

"For my youngest, he'd rather play video games than eat... My son always wants to buy candy [from influencers they see online] at the store."

Father of three

"I mean, those influencers have more influence than me. That's the unfortunate part."

Mother of two teens

Addictive Tech Habits

- ☐ Are they becoming fixated on food videos or diet influencers, and having a hard time pulling away?
- ☐ Do they think about food, dieting, or their body constantly—even when they're offline?
- ☐ Do they feel like they have to keep scrolling, even when they're tired, hungry, or feeling bad about themselves?
- ☐ Are they getting stuck on appearance-focused content, like beauty filters, makeup tutorials, or 'perfect body' reels that make them feel worse about themselves the more they scroll?
- ☐ Do I worry that the algorithm might be repeatedly feeding them unhealthy food and beauty content—without them even realizing it?



“Diet culture and pro-eating disorder content is being repackaged in a more clever, insidious way—as the ‘health and wellness space.’ Drink this detox tea, try this workout, do this parasite cleanse. It’s all to make it more palatable to the mainstream.”

Anjuli Corzine, Marriage & Family Therapist specializing in eating disorders

FROM THE RESEARCH

Kids and young adults with problematic internet habits are twice as likely to show signs of an eating disorder.

Screens at Mealtime

- ☐ Are they so focused on a screen during meals that they’re either overeating without noticing—or forgetting to eat altogether?
- ☐ Am I relying on screens to keep kids quiet during meals or in restaurants?
- ☐ Do I want meals to be a time for connection, but struggle when devices are always within reach?
- ☐ Do they see meals as just another chance to watch videos instead of connecting with others?

"In parent–child therapy, I often hear about the use of technology as a babysitter. Parents are overwhelmed by the daily stresses of life and use a screen to keep their kid occupied."

Dr. Alicia Lieberman, Director of the Child Trauma Research Program at University of California, San Francisco

“If you’re trying to connect to an intuitive model of eating, kids will become disconnected from their body when screens are involved. It’s important to really connect to the act of eating. When you’re on a screen, you’re not embodied.”

Johanna Kandel, Founder and CEO at the National Alliance for Eating Disorders

Harmful Trends & Terms to Know

Kids and teens see lots of trends and slang about food, bodies, and fitness. Not all are harmful—but some can promote unhealthy ideas. Young people in competitive sports, performing arts, or other activities where appearance is central may be especially vulnerable to these messages. Here are a few to watch for:

"Alpha male"

content – Videos tying masculinity to muscular bodies, dominance, and extreme discipline.

"Bulking" / "Cutting"

Diet extremes to gain muscle ("bulking") or lose fat ("cutting"), often promoted in male fitness circles.

"Fibermaxxing" – a TikTok trend where people try to pack in as much dietary fiber as possible, but can signal unhealthy food restriction or obsession with eating "clean" if taken to extremes.

"Body Checking" / "Thigh Gap" / "Legging Legs"

Videos or photos focused on examining or showing off body parts, often linked to body anxiety.

"Clean Eating" / "Clean Girl" / "Detox" – Diets or trends promoting "pure" eating, which can become restrictive or obsessive.

"Fitspo" / "Thinspo" / "#SkinnyTok"

Posts promoting extreme weight loss, thinness, or strict exercise routines.

"FitTok" – Fitness content on TikTok that can promote unrealistic body standards or intense routines.

"Gains" – Slang for muscle growth, sometimes leading to obsessive exercise or diet habits.

"Girl Dinner" – Small, snack-like meal that is posted online as a dinner. Sometimes harmless, but can normalize low-calorie eating for girls.

"Guilt-free"

Suggests some foods are morally bad, which can fuel shame around eating.

"Healthy girl summer" / "It girl"

content – Trends promoting a specific slim, aesthetic lifestyle as the ideal.

"Gym bro" – Culture obsessed with lifting weights, supplements, and "grind" mentality, often linked to extreme body ideals for boys.

"Starvation diet" / "Cheat day"

Language tied to rigid food rules and guilt about eating.

"What I Eat in a Day" – Videos showing everything someone eats. Can create pressure to copy restrictive or excessive eating.

"Mukbang"

Videos of people eating huge amounts of food. Can trigger those struggling with binge eating.



If you hear or see these terms, it's worth gently asking your child what they've seen and how it makes them feel.

Starting the Conversation

Open conversations are the most powerful way to help kids navigate food, body image, and tech. Kids are curious about what they see online—but they need help making sense of it. The conversation starters below link to the worries in Tool 1 so you can focus where it matters most.

Pro Tips for Tough Conversations*

- **Timing matters.** Bring tricky topics up during calm, everyday moments—not while stressed.
- **Keep it real and keep it simple.** Use language your child understands.
- **Listen first.** Give kids space to talk and try not to jump in too quickly.
- **Acknowledge feelings.** Let them know it's normal to feel confused, worried, or curious.
- **Share your own stories.** Talking about your own experiences can help kids feel less alone.
- **End on a hopeful note.** Reinforce messages of self-worth and well-being.

Conversation Starters

NUTRITION & EATING HABITS

All Ages

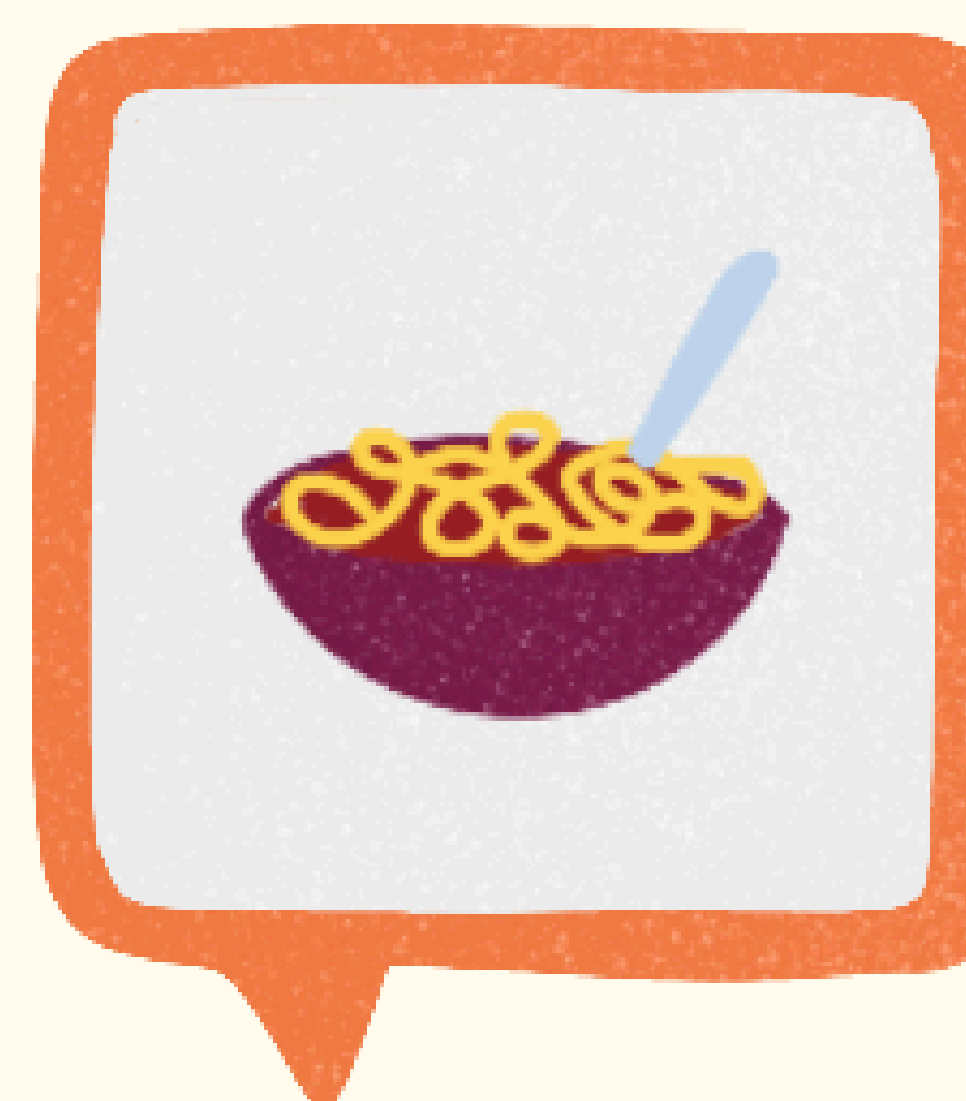
- Is there a recipe you'd like to try making together? Maybe one you've seen online?
- What's the funniest food video you've seen online?

Younger Kids (4–9)

- How does your tummy feel when you're full? How does it feel when you're still hungry?
- Do you like cooking? What would you like to try making?
- Have you seen a video telling people what to eat or avoid? What did you think?

Tweens & Teens (10–18)

- Have you ever felt confused about what's healthy because different people online say different things?
- Do you notice yourself snacking more or less when you spend time online? What kinds of foods do you crave?



Conversation Starters

BODY IMAGE PRESSURES

All Ages

- Why do you think people use filters or edit their photos and videos?

Younger Kids (4–9)

- Do you know that sometimes pictures and videos online are edited to look different from real life?
- How do you feel about your body most days?
- If someone said something mean about your body, what could you do?

Tweens & Teens (10–18)

- Do you ever feel pressure to look a certain way because of what you see online or what your friends post?
- If you come across a video online about diets, workouts, or body shape, how does it make you feel?
- Is there anything online that makes you feel better—or worse—about yourself or your body?
- What messages do you hear about how people 'should' look or eat? Where do you think those messages come from?

INFLUENCER MESSAGES & RISKY TRENDS

All Ages

- Why do you think some videos or ads online make certain foods or drinks seem special or exciting?

Younger Kids (4–9)

- Have you seen videos where people show off fancy food, clothes, or beauty products? How did it make you feel?
- Do you think some food ads online are trying to make us want certain snacks or drinks?
- If someone online told you a food or drink was healthy, how could we check if that's true?

Tweens & Teens (10–18)

- How do you know if food or health information online is true?
- Can you tell when a post is an ad to get you to buy something, or someone just sharing?
- Have you ever wanted to try a diet or workout you saw online? What made it interesting to you?
- Have you ever heard someone talk about 'gains' or 'cutting' in fitness videos? What do you think about that?

DID YOU KNOW?

On average, adolescents are exposed to about 17 food and beverage ads for every hour they spend online, most often through social media.

Conversation Starters

ADDICTIVE TECH HABITS

All Ages

- Have you ever wanted to stop watching videos or playing games but found it hard to stop? How did that feel?

Younger Kids (4–9)

- When you're online, do you see the same types of videos over and over? Why do you think that happens?
- Have you ever watched videos about food or snacks so much that you kept thinking about them even after stopping?

Tweens & Teens (10–18)

- Do you ever feel overwhelmed by seeing too many food videos or health tips online?
- Do you notice yourself scrolling or watching videos even when you feel tired, hungry, or upset?
- How do you think social media decides what videos or posts to show you—especially about food or body image?

SCREENS AT MEALTIME

All Ages

- Do you notice how you feel when you eat and watch videos at the same time?

Younger Kids (4–9)

- Do you think food tastes different when we watch videos during meals?
- What do you enjoy about eating together without screens?

Tweens & Teens (10–18)

- Do you notice a difference in how much you eat or enjoy your food when you're using screens at mealtime?
- How do you feel about taking a break from screens during meals—would it be easy or hard for you? Why?



Building Healthy Habits At Home

“When I cook, I have them join me because they love being there.”

Grandmother of four

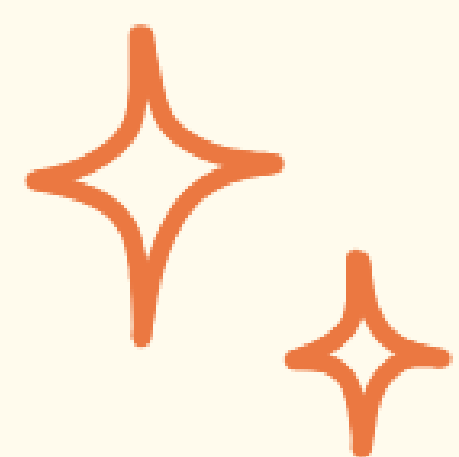
Children learn as much from what we **do** as from what we **say**. Here are practical, evidence-backed strategies and real-life examples of how you can model healthy habits to help kids develop balanced, confident relationships with food—even in a tech-heavy world.

1) Involve Kids in Food Choices

Cooking together is about more than just food. It builds bonds and traditions, whether through family recipes or new celebrations. Let kids help choose meals, shop for ingredients, and explore new recipes online before cooking them as a family. Involving kids reduces screen time, builds confidence, and teaches lifelong skills.

Try This:

- Experiment with different cooking methods (like roasting, sautéing, or eating veggies raw) to encourage curiosity and support diverse tastes.
- Check out online resources like [Serious Eats](#), [The Kitchn](#), [PBS Food](#), [Cooking Matters](#), [ChopChop Family](#), or [CaliforniaGrown.org](#) for inspiration, new recipes, and cooking techniques.



Pro Tip: The [California Farm to School](#) programs bring fresh, locally grown foods to every student—so all kids, regardless of income or background, can experience nutritious meals. Ask your child about any new foods they’ve tried at school. Exploring those ingredients together at home helps healthy habits take root.

“The most important strategy I have employed involves two things. Firstly, I go shopping with them, and secondly, I cook with them.”

Mother of three

“My son likes TikTok videos. But I monitor those with him... some of the recipes he likes, he’ll say, ‘Oh, mom, let’s try this recipe.’ And he likes that because then he likes to help me cook.”

Mother of teen boy

“We basically found vegetables that they liked or at least tolerated... Because otherwise, kids say, ‘Oh, I’ve had red peppers. I hate them,’ when really, ‘No, you’ve had red peppers one way... Maybe there’s another way that you actually like red peppers.’”

Father of two

2) Make Mealtime Meaningful

‘Healthy’ meals look different in every family. What matters is consistency, connection, and a positive attitude—whether it’s takeout, homemade, or school meals. Family meals—even if only two people are home—are linked to better mental health, healthier eating habits, and lower rates of disordered eating.

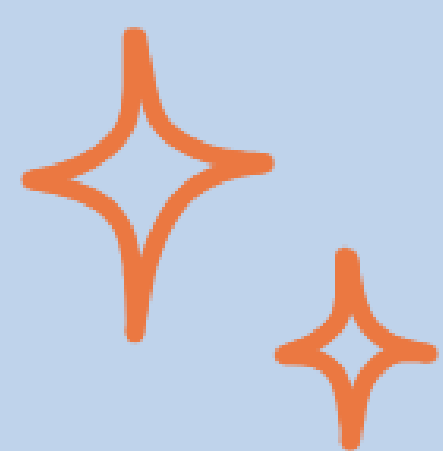
Try This:

- Embed family meals into your weekly routine, even once or twice a week.
- Turn off devices during family meals to preserve connection.
- If you’re able, splurge on takeout to relieve some of the pressure.
- Use conversation games like “Rose, Thorn, Bud” to get kids talking about one good thing from the day (rose), one challenge (thorn), and one thing they’re looking forward to (bud).



Pro Tip:

“Parents set the pattern...If dad’s phone is out at dinner, then how are you going to get the kids to put the phone away at dinner?”



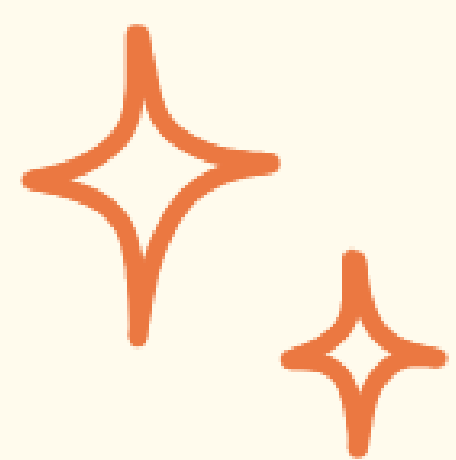
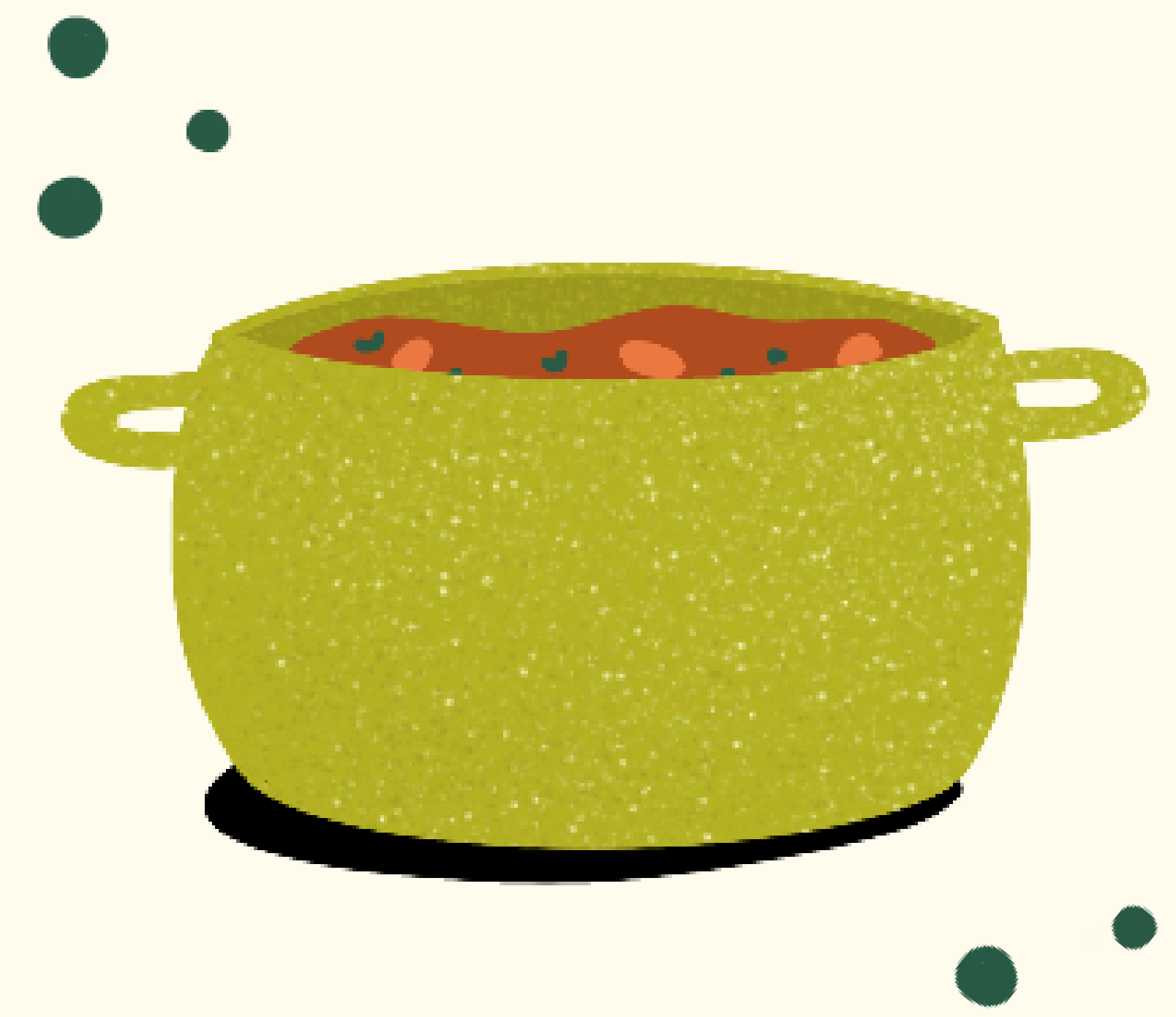
Anya Kamenetz, Author of *The Art of Screen Time: How Your Family Can Balance Digital Media and Real Life*

3) Connect Food and Social-Emotional Health

Food and feelings are connected. When kids see adults modeling balanced eating, positive body talk, and healthy ways of managing stress, they’re more likely to build self-esteem and a healthy relationship with food. A balanced diet doesn’t just fuel the body—it supports emotional resilience, reduces the risk of mental health challenges, and helps kids handle stress in healthier ways.

Try This:

- Avoid using food as a reward (“You can have dessert if you behave”) or punishment (“No snack if you don’t finish dinner”).
- When your child is upset, model other ways to cope besides eating—like talking it out, going for a walk, or drawing.
- Show your child it’s okay to enjoy food by sharing what you like about a meal—its flavor, texture, or how it makes you feel.



Pro tip: For more tools on nurturing kids’ mental and emotional health—especially in a digital world—check out our [Social-Emotional Health Guide](#). It’s full of strategies for building connection, resilience, and open communication.

4) Talk Positively About Food and Bodies

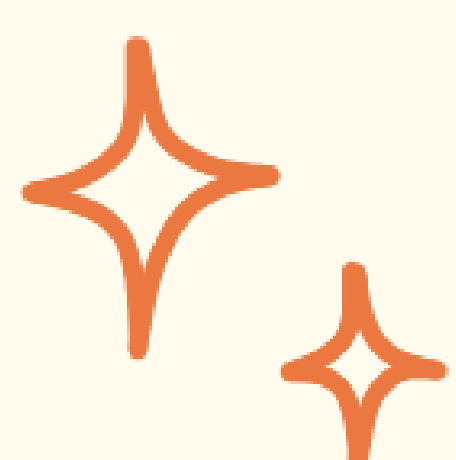
Habits aren't just shaped online, but also influenced by family, friends, sports teams, and community. Checking in gives kids tools to stay true to themselves under peer pressure. Encourage kids to come to you if they feel uncomfortable about things friends say about food or appearances.

“I try to celebrate my body for helping me experience the world, but also remember I am so much more than how I look. When I think of my loved ones, it’s their kindness and spirit I remember, not their appearance. Our bodies are just the vehicle through which we learn to love and connect as human beings.”

Emi Sakamoto, 19-year-old Child Well-Being Advisory Council Member

Try This:

- Avoid labeling foods as “good” or “bad.”
- Focus on how food nourishes us and how our bodies function, rather than how they look.
- Celebrate body diversity—remind kids that all bodies are good bodies.
- Share how you handle comments from friends or coworkers about diets or body shape.



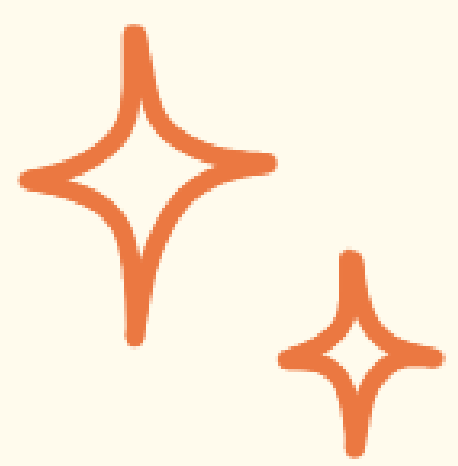
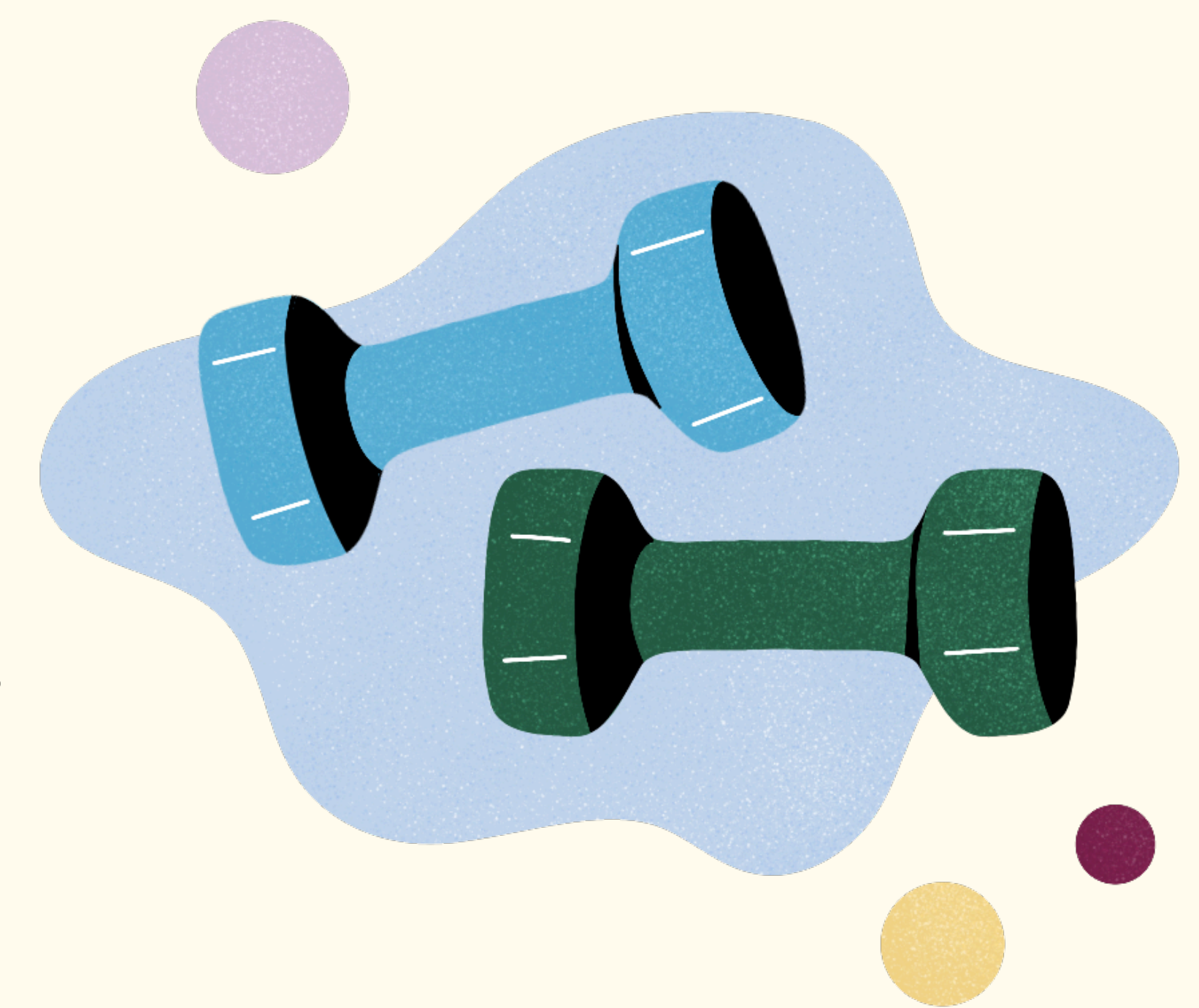
Pro Tip: Stay alert for signs your child may be struggling, including: frequent body comparisons, skipping meals or binge eating, talking negatively about food, secrecy around eating, irregular eating habits, and decision paralysis when it comes to food.

5) Encourage Healthy Movement

Support daily physical activity—it's not only good for muscles and bones, but also regulates appetite, reduces emotional eating, and helps kids develop a positive relationship with their bodies.

Try This:

- Go for a short family walk after meals and play 20 Questions.
- Dance to a favorite song while clearing the table and doing dishes—let your kid be the DJ!
- Model how to focus on what bodies *do* rather than how bodies *look* by saying “I love how strong I feel after exercising,” or “Moving helps me feel calmer when I'm stressed.”



Pro tip: Movement and nutrition are closely linked. For more ideas on weaving movement into everyday life despite the pull of screens, check out our [Movement & Outdoor Activity Guide](#) full of practical tips for getting kids moving in ways they enjoy. You can also explore California's [Move Your Body](#), [Calm Your Mind](#) resources, which connect movement with emotional well-being—perfect for families seeking simple strategies.

6) Model Digital Literacy and Media Balance

In a screen-saturated world, kids learn far more from what they see adults do than from what we say. Modeling digital literacy helps kids think critically, filter marketing, and resist unrealistic images.

Try This:

- Curate your social media feed together using the [American Academy of Pediatrics resource](#).
- [Reset your social media algorithms](#) to unfollow accounts that promote unrealistic body standards or extreme diets.
- Watch the [Center for Digital Thriving's "Design Tricks" video](#) together, then debrief on how apps use persuasive design: autoplay feeds, targeted ads, dopamine loops.



Pro tip: Model critical thinking by writing these questions on a sticky note in a central location. Ask them aloud regularly after watching videos or scrolling:

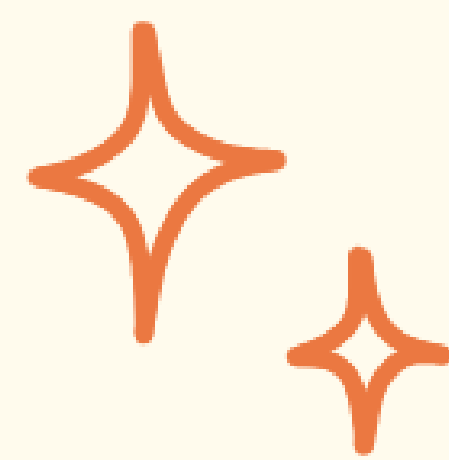
- Is this real or edited?
- Who made this, and why?
- Are they trying to sell me something?
- How does this make me feel?

7) Prepare for Meals Outside the Home

Meals outside the home often bring distractions and screens. A little prep can create screen-free moments of creativity and calm. And sometimes, screens are the only option—that's okay. Balance is key.

Try This:

- Pack a "go bag" of no-tech or low-tech activities for restaurants, outings, or travel.

☐ **Coloring books**☐ **Mad Libs**☐ **Origami paper**☐ **Puzzle books or brain teasers**☐ **Card games**☐ **Cat's Cradle string**☐ **Friendship bracelet kit**☐ **Small toys or fidget items**☐ **Travel-sized board games**☐ **Magnetic tiles**☐ **A new paperback book**☐ **Journals or doodle pads**☐ **Crochet or knitting supplies**☐ **Handheld water arcade games**

Pro tip: Let your child choose what goes in the bag so they're excited to use it. For a fun twist, wrap a new book or small toy in gift paper as a surprise. It makes the occasion feel special and provides a no-tech option for waiting times.

Worried About Disordered Eating?

Start Here: A Caregiver's Roadmap



- 1. Notice the signs.** Changes in eating habits, body talk, secrecy, irritability, or obsession with food or weight may signal something deeper.
- 2. Express concern, not judgment.** Use calm, caring language to open a conversation. You might say, "I've noticed some changes, and I'm wondering how you're feeling."
- 3. Listen and validate.** Let your child talk. Avoid jumping in with advice. Acknowledge that these feelings are hard and that they're not alone.
- 4. Avoid power struggles over food.** Focus on connection, not control. If mealtimes are stressful, seek professional support.
- 5. Reach out for help.** Talk to your pediatrician, school counselor, or a mental health professional. Early support makes a big difference.

DID YOU KNOW?

Did you know 1 in 3 posts on social media are actually ads for food?



Need support now?

Contact the National Alliance for Eating Disorders Helpline for free confidential help from licensed therapists: +1 (866) 662-1235
Or visit: www.allianceforeatingdisorders.com

Additional Resources

- National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) – nationaleatingdisorders.org
- Social Media Driver's License – socialmediadriverslicense.org
- BrightLife Kids: Free mental health coaching for parents and kids 0–12 – hellobrightline.com/brightlifekids
- Soluna: Confidential mental health support for ages 13–25 in California – solunaapp.com
- 211 California: A free, 24/7 helpline connecting families to local food resources, nutrition assistance, and other community support.
- The Family Meals Movement – www.fmi.org/family-meals
- The Family Dinner Project
- LogOFF – Forks Up, Phones Down
- American Academy of Pediatrics – Screens at Supper Tipsheet
- Recipes for Healthy Kids Cookbook for Homes
- Twelve Neuroprotective Steps for Talking to Kids & Teens
- Embrace Kids Global
- The Selfie Talk: Self-esteem in the social media age | Dove
- Children & Screens: Digital Media and Youth Body Image
- Book: Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture
- Movie: Generation Flex
- Podcast: This Teenage Life – Moving Past Diet Culture & Towards Real Nutrition

In partnership with California First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom, this guide was created by the California Partners Project with support from Young Futures. To learn more about our research and find more tips and resources for families, visit www.calpartnersproject.org.



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