

Parents can help their kids eat more healthfully

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Cheryl Vollmer and daughter Kimberly, 9, make turkey meatballs at home. Vollmer has written a book to help children make healthful food choices. Robin Jerstad/Special to the Express-News

When Cheryl Vollmer's daughter was 3 years old, Vollmer would ask her, "Do you have a hungry lion in your tummy? Is it time to eat?"

Vollmer would then silence the wild beast by serving Kimberly a meal or snack — a healthy one.

Now, Kimberly is 9 and Vollmer is spreading the message of healthy eating for kids with "A Hungry Lion in My Tummy" (Epigraph Books, \$14.95), a book for kids ages 2-7.

In the book, illustrated by Greek artist Nick Dimitriadis, a big but friendly lion serves as the feline manifestation of the rumblings of two children's ravenous stomachs.

The little girl and boy must find wholesome foods to feed him to help him in his daily lion life: honey for quick

energy so he can hunt, carrots so he can see what's sneaking around in the grass.

"I have a passion for conveying positive messages to children. It's not talking at them. It's talking with them," says Vollmer, 49, who teaches Sunday school and also etiquette for kids.

"I didn't want to do it in a preachy way. No child wants to hear a lecture on vitamins A, B, C, D."

Vollmer also has a tip for parents: Feed your children what you eat. It's how she and her husband, John, taught Kimberly to eat a good diet from an early age.

"When my daughter was a preschooler, I didn't order her meals from a children's menu. She ate what we ordered, chicken or fish with vegetables and salad," she says. "So today she understands a healthy diet. Nuggets and french fries do not dictate our lives."

That method also had a beneficial side effect: Vollmer began ordering more nutritious meals to set a better example.

"I gave up on burgers and fries to show her how to eat healthy," she says. "It really falls on the parents changing the lifestyle."

Vollmer doesn't recommend restricting junk food entirely, though. That can cause kids to binge.

"Do we have sweets in our house? Yes. We're a normal family," she laughs.


In Vollmer's book, the lion gobbles some familiar foods, such as an orange and milk. But he also munches on Brazil nuts and kiwi. Vollmer hopes introducing unusual foods will provoke conversations between parents and kids and pique their palates.

Parents should continue introducing new foods to their kids as they grow up, Vollmer says, because their tastes will evolve. She suggests serving vegetables with foods they already eat. Make broccoli more appetizing by serving it with some rice or potatoes, for example.

"You have to keep trying. Don't throw in the towel. Find (a vegetable) they will eat," she says. "My daughter likes raw spinach. I can't get her to eat squash, but I'm not giving up on that."

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