

October 10, 2022

Release Date: October 19, 2022

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HOW TO BEAT THE CANDY BOWL BLUES

I'm asking myself the question most of us ask this time of year—am I filling up the candy bowl? As Halloween and holiday season approaches, you're probably asking yourself the same question.

In my neighborhood Halloween night is a time for friendly greetings, “spooky” creative expression, and scoring a bag of treats big enough to last until next year. As the night ends, sugar highs become sugar lows. Despite the fun, it can be a parent's nightmare to figure out what to do with the candy. We've all experienced it—the candy bowl blues. How much candy should I allow my child to eat? What should I throw away? What about all the sugar?

Researchers have been searching for answers to these question for years. As a community we share concerns about obesity and children's health. Recent data from Maryland Health and Human Services shows that statewide obesity rates keep rising. Does this mean that all sweets and treats should be considered “forbidden foods” and removed from our diets immediately? Should we restrict ourselves from candy-filled occasions like Halloween? It's a touchy subject.

Our personal relationships with food are complex. We often are confused and conflicted about dietary advice. We have self-doubt and feel guilty about our food choices. Generationally, our confusion and conflicts with food can be passed to our children.

A recent systematic review conducted by scientists at the University of Washington in Missouri examined 21 years of research trials on parent-child influences on childhood eating. They found that restrictive and controlling feeding styles can inhibit a child's ability to recognize hunger and regulate food intake. Over time, this can lead to emotional eating, overeating and weight gain. The good news is that feeding styles that promote structure and eating autonomy were related to decreased emotional eating and better self-regulation in children.

Dietitian and Family Therapist Ellyn Satter offers tips on how to create an environment of eating autonomy in her Division of Responsibility in Feeding model. Developed and tested over many years, Satter's model places trust in a child's natural ability to regulate food intake. The key to Satter's model is that meals and snacks are structured, with parents and caregivers providing “what, when and where” to eat. Children are then allowed to eat freely during those times, deciding autonomously whether to eat and how much.

To combat the candy bowl blues, Satter suggests using Halloween as an opportunity to teach your child how to manage their own bag of treats. Her goal is to have children become relaxed about sweets, rather than feeling treat-deprived.

At my house what this means for Halloween and other sweets-heavy occasions is that I will try my best to offer a nutritious meal beforehand. This will help the kids be less hungry for candy, and less prone to sugar crash later in the night. I'll follow Satter's advice to allow the children to enjoy as much candy as they want after they get home. The days following, we'll have candy at snack time and a few pieces with dinner. After a few days when all the favorites are gone, we'll decide what stays in the candy bowl.

I've had good luck with this model. Recognizing that each child and each family dynamic has unique circumstances, I encourage you to visit Satter's website ellynsatterinstitute.org if you'd like to learn more.

Outside of the candy bowl, there are many naturally sweet and nutritious fall season foods that the whole family will enjoy. One of our favorite fall dishes is oven-roasted sweet potatoes. The recipe is very simple, but you must give the sweet potatoes enough time in the oven to caramelize and concentrate flavor. An alternative quick-cooking method to enjoy sweet potatoes is to cook frozen sweet potatoes in a small amount of boiling water on the stovetop. Season with butter or olive oil and sprinkle with cinnamon for a sweet and savory taste of fall. Or, try them seasoned with cumin and a dash of cayenne pepper for a smoky sweet heat.

OVEN-ROASTED SWEET POTATOES

4 large sweet potatoes of similar shape
4 tablespoons butter
1/2 tablespoon olive oil
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon salt

Preheat oven to 400°F. Wash and dry sweet potatoes. Prick potato skins 4-5 times with a fork and place in baking dish lined with foil or parchment. Rub skins with olive oil and sprinkle skins with salt. Bake in the oven for 60-75 minutes, flipping the potatoes after 35 minutes. Potatoes are done when flesh is tender to a fork or paring knife, juices begin to release, and skins darken. Gently remove sweet potatoes from baking dish and allow to cool 15-20 minutes. Slice open and serve with butter, cinnamon and a pinch of salt.

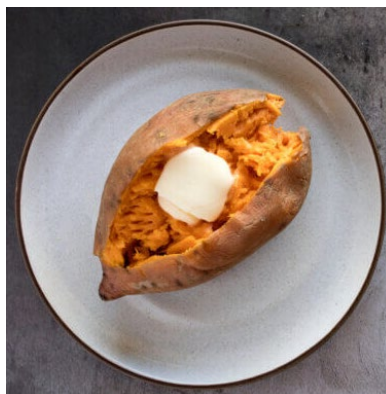


Photo credit: North Carolina Sweet Potato Commission

Join me on November 30th to make Holiday Jams and Jellies! Space is limited. Contact jvogin@umd.edu for more information and to register.

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Joi Vogin, MS, LDN is a licensed Nutritionist and Clinical Herbalist. She joined the University of Maryland Extension Frederick office in June as the Family and Consumer Sciences Educator. She welcomes your favorite recipes and suggestions for future articles. Call or email Joi at 301-600-3573 and jvogin@umd.edu .

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