Tis the season for gardening and farmer's markets*! These are both opportunities to choose some healthy options for your menus and involve the kids.

Kids are very inquisitive and usually up for playing in the dirt! Now may be a good time to start up a garden or visit a farmer’s market to explore new foods and learn about good health. Many fruits and vegetables are in season right now and have tremendous health benefits. Veggies and fruits are high in vitamins and minerals that can boost our immune system and keep us healthier.

Kansas State University nutrition specialist, Dr. Sandy Procter said, “A lot of people are very interested in gardening right now because, first of all, they are home more and they have the time to be there and oversee the garden. We've had a lovely spring for planting and rains seemed to be have been nicely spaced for starting a garden.”

The excitement of taking a seed or small plant and seeing that grow into a food can be very memorable for kids. Children can be the caretaker of that seed and learn responsibility for watering their plant, weeding and harvesting. Besides instilling the love and excitement of gardening, encouraging healthy foods habits, and saving money by growing your own food, gardening can teach skills that last a lifetime.

Procter cites research that indicates when kids grow healthy food, they’re also more likely to eat it. “It’s a good way to learn a healthful practice, but also a good way for kids to appreciate the flavor and nutrition of some of the produce that they will be lucky enough to take part in,” Procter said.

Procter talked about the importance of the USDA’s MyPlate program, which encourages eating a mixture of healthy foods. “When you look at MyPlate, you see that at least half of your plate should be fruits and vegetables,” Procter said. “This is where summer foods make it really easy. There are so many opportunities to put colorful fruits and vegetables on your plate and really make that the focus of the meal.”

Procter said MyPlate makes it easier for kids to learn about eating a balanced meal. For example, a healthy meal might include half a plate of fruit or vegetables, some pasta, milk and small amount of meat, fish or proteins.

Children can also learn about different foods and how to prepare them by helping in the kitchen. “It’s not too early to talk about reading labels and figuring out what’s in the foods they’re eating,” Procter said. “That’s kind of a fun task for kids and it can inform their healthy choices. Young minds are very fertile, and those lessons have a very good chance of sticking with them throughout their lives.”

Locally, classes can be presented to many community and school settings on MyPlate, nutrition and health. If you are interested in scheduling a class or attending an upcoming class series on nutrition, please call or email the Chisholm Trail District office of K-State Research and Extension in Dickinson County. If you are curious about MyPlate, cooking, food safety, or shopping on a budget, please contact Atalie Tompkins, SNAP-Ed nutrition educator at 785-263-2001 or by email at atomp@ksu.edu.

*remember to practice facial mask use and distancing at least 6ft from others if you are attending a farmer's market!