

A parent's guide to... healthy eating

Getting a child to eat and drink a nutritionally balanced diet can be difficult. *Penny Tassoni* provides some useful tips

Hardly a week goes by without childhood obesity or another food issue being flagged up in the media. Feeding children should be a simple task, but the reality for many parents is very different. First, there are often some mixed messages about what is good for children and what should be limited. Then, for some families, there is the difficulty of coping with children who are fussy or are already set in their ways.

FIVE FACTS ABOUT FOOD

Here are five things worth knowing about food in early childhood:

1. Nutrients matter

There is an irony that some young children who are overweight are actually undernourished. This is because the foods that they are eating are not sufficiently high in vitamins and minerals such as iron and calcium. Nutrients matter in early childhood because the young body needs them to support the growth that is taking place.

2. Stomach size

As adults, it is easy to forget that children's stomach capacity and calorie requirements are much lower than ours. A two-year-old having a chocolate bar and a pouch of juice drink will use up nearly a quarter of their daily calories, which may not leave them enough space for nutrient-rich foods. The advice is, therefore, to be very careful about how many and how often your child is having 'treats'.

3. Drink water

While some milk is important in children's diets, at mealtimes and when out and about, children should drink plain water. Water is needed to help with digestion and also to avoid constipation. Water is also recommended for children as, with the exception of milk, other drinks including flavoured water and juice can cause dental decay.

4. Learn healthy habits

It may seem odd but young children have to learn the habits associated with long-term health. One of these includes learning to sit and also to focus on what you are eating. This is important in helping to regulate our appetite and is why it is recommended that from early on, children learn to sit and eat at a table, including for snacks.

5. Veg out

Another habit that young children need to gain is to love vegetables. Vegetables are important as a source of many minerals and vitamins. In adulthood, eating plenty of vegetables can help with weight regulation. Vegetables need to be introduced to children early on in life and in a positive way. It is worth thinking about how you present and talk about them.

TIPS FOR HAPPY MEALTIMES

While there is no simple formula to having happy mealtimes, here are a few tips that are worth trying out:



It is easier to eat when you are hungry

It may seem obvious, but you are more likely to have success at introducing new foods or encouraging your child to eat more 'healthy' food if they come to the table hungry. If your child is not hungry at a mealtime, remember to give much smaller portions and choose foods that you know will be good for them. Think also about why your child is not hungry. Could they be poorly or have they filled up on other things?

Variety is the spice of life

There is some research to say that we eat more when there is variety. This means your child is more likely to eat vegetables and other nutritionally good foods if you provide plenty of many small portions of different things. The need for variety is why picnics are often popular with children.



Avoid mixed messages

Children learn about attitudes towards food from the adults they are with. It is, therefore, worth unpicking what your child may be learning from you. Do you view vegetables as a necessary evil or do you actually enjoy them? Do you sit down to eat? Do you eat 'treats' as a reward or for compensation?

Involving children

The more children are involved in the preparation, cooking and serving of food, the more likely they are to be positive about it. Surprisingly, young children can get involved in food preparation even if this just means washing a tomato or serving themselves at the table.

Find out about portion sizes

Many parents are unsure quite how much food their children should be eating. This can lead to battles where parents are expecting

their children to wade through too much food or where children start to put on excessive weight. If you are unsure about how many slices of toast are appropriate or how many potatoes should be on the plate, download *Eating Well for 1-4 Year Olds*, produced by The Caroline Walker Trust (<http://bit.ly/1W3wxm8>).

COMMON PROBLEMS

My child won't drink water!

If your child has not picked up the habit of drinking water, start off by role-modelling drinking water at mealtimes. Think about putting out a small jug so that your child can pour it. You could also put a few ice cubes in to make it seem more appealing. Finally, you may have to hold firm. If there is no alternative to water, eventually your child's survival thirst system will kick in and they will then be happy to drink it.

My child refuses the main course but will eat pudding

Puddings often cause tensions at meal times. Often adults unwittingly use them as a reward for finishing off the more nutritious main course. Try to break the habit of providing a pudding at each meal. You could have a starter or cheese and biscuits as an additional course.

Eating lots of sweet foods in early childhood can lead to a 'sweet tooth' later in life, and with that, a higher intake of sugar and a greater chance of obesity. So, keep an eye on the number of sweet tastes that you are providing for your child and make sure that you are balancing these with neutral or savoury-tasting foods.

GETTING HELP

If you feel that your child's diet is too restricted or are concerned about their weight, do think about getting professional support. Talk to your health visitor or ask your GP to refer you to a dietitian. Early food habits can make a difference to later development, so it is worth getting help earlier rather than later. ■

