

Childhood nutrition

James Spencer from Worthing Leisure reports on the importance of good nutrition for growing children...

Child health experts from Change4life and the NHS say that nutritional advice for children is being ignored and diet-related problems like constipation, diarrhoea, teeth rot, lethargy and inadequate bone growth are on the increase.

Fortunately a wealth of nutritional information is available, thanks to the web and knowledgeable teachers in schools and crèche facilities. Education, it seems, is the key to taking care of ourselves and our children.

Adele Brooks, Crèche Supervisor at Worthing Leisure Centre, is one of many child support workers that recognise the importance of good nutrition during the first formative years of childhood. Adele said: *"The correct nutrition is essential, balanced between high energy and nutrient-rich foods packed with vitamins and minerals, particularly protein, calcium, iron and vitamins A and D. These are required for growth, development and weight control."*

So what is the 'recipe' for a good, balanced diet for children?

Online nutritional advisors, www.kidsandnutrition.co.uk, state that a typical child aged

between two and eight years old will use up to 1600 calories per day and as they approach teenage years, their daily calorie consumption closely matches adults at over 2000 calories.

A cheap, readily available family staple is milk which is full of calcium and is rich in energy and nutrients. Red meat is the best source of easily absorbable iron and other additions include green vegetables, pulses, bread and some breakfast cereals. Oily fish, rich in Omega 3, is also recommended two to four times per week.

All foods high in sugar, including fizzy drinks, should be restricted for many health reasons. The high acid content alone rots teeth, particularly in young children, along with caffeine, preservatives and colourings that have detrimental effects on tiny tummies.

As equally important as a balanced diet is the right mental attitude towards eating. The department of health recently reported that as many as one in ten children aged between seven and twelve years old have reported an eating disorder. With childhood years the most formative of all, a positive, family approach to a healthy diet is essential.

Family meals are viewed by Relate relationship experts as 'key building blocks to a social, stable home life.' Participation in family activities has a positive impact on all of the family.

Get the children involved!

When out shopping give them a job like checking your shopping list and asking them to help find the healthy food. It'll save time and teach them about healthy eating.

Children may be more excited by what they eat if they have chosen and helped prepare a meal. Growing your own fruit and vegetables can be a great way to be more involved. If you have the space and resources and would like a different, fun way to introduce pets, why not get chickens. Eggs are a great natural source of protein and vitamins.

Setting a good example...

Children often want to eat what the adults are eating! So, whatever's on the menu keep it the same or similar for everyone and children will feel less like they are missing out. But if a child has become picky with food, patience is required! If they won't eat, don't get angry, but don't offer an alternative. Just clear away the plate calmly not drawing attention to it. And if mealtimes suddenly become a battleground of wills, step back and don't force children to eat if they don't want to. Never give in to demands for unhealthy foods either

Rewards and incentives

Always try to avoid using 'treat' foods like sweets and biscuits as rewards for good behaviour. Similarly, never deprive a child of food as punishment for bad behaviour. These methods

have significantly negative, psychological effects for children and should be avoided.

It is possible to reward children in other ways and a star chart is a good idea. Offer a star for each new food a child tries, and agree a non-food treat once a child reaches a certain number of stars, like a special afternoon out or a visit to the toyshop. Essentially, good all-round nutrition is common sense that makes sense. It can also be fun and does not need to be difficult or expensive.

There is a wealth of information and advice at various sources. If you want to know more, visit: www.nhs.uk/change4life/ or www.patient.co.uk/doctor/childhood-nutrition

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