
HEALTHY EATING HABITS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Introduction

The first five years of life are viewed as particularly important as it is a time when eating behaviours develop, that can serve as a foundation for future eating patterns. Healthy eating habits are about far more than simply what a child eats, but also include how your little ones eats. This includes how much they eat, how often and the relationship they develop with food is really important.

The influence of others

During the first years of life, childrens' food and eating play a central role in shaping subsequent food choices, diet quality, and weight. Children are learning what, when, and how much to eat; based on the transmission of cultural and familial beliefs, attitudes, and practices surrounding food and eating.

Parents play a powerful role in children's eating behaviour, providing both genes and the environment for children. For example, they influence children's developing preferences and eating behaviours by making some foods available rather than others, and by acting as models of eating behaviour.

Ref: [Parental influence on eating behaviour: conception to adolescence](#)

Likewise, peers can have a positive influence on eating. Several intervention studies have shown that children have increased consumption of, or have expressed a liking of fruit and vegetables, due to the influence of their peers eating or liking fruit and vegetables.

Ref: [Assessing eating context and fruit and vegetable consumption in children](#)

Role modelling

One of the reasons family meals are so important is that there is repeated opportunity for us, as parents or caregivers, to show that we eat a variety of foods. This includes new or unfamiliar foods and those disliked by our children.

What children see most often is what they are most likely to imitate. It is important for us, as parents or caregivers, to show that healthy foods are enjoyable. After all, we can't expect our child to do something we are not prepared to do ourselves. Take, for example, if we don't eat salad, can we expect our children to eat salad? Or if salad is rarely available in our house, then there are less opportunities for our children to be exposed to it.

Research shows that children whose parents eat more fruit and vegetables, typically eat more of these foods themselves; but that children whose parents eat more savoury snacks consume more of these too.

Ref: [Child Eating Guide: Role Modelling](#)

This is another reason not to make separate food for our kids as our goal is to expose our kids to the same foods that the rest of the family eat (once it is safe for their age). This also sends the message that there are no 'special' foods just for kids, for example, chicken nuggets for the kids if the rest of the family are eating chicken.

If our children are not that keen on many vegetables; it maybe very tempting to 'hide' vegetables, i.e., disguise them in some other food or drink such as a smoothie. There is of course nothing wrong with boosting the nutritional quality of foods. However, this means our child will not get used to the appearance, taste or texture of these vegetables.

It is therefore best to serve vegetables close to their original form sometimes too, such as in a stir fry.

Ideally, we should try to avoid tricking our kids into eating foods, as it may reduce trust. Over time we may get caught in the act such as adding vegetables to their favourite muffin. It may result in our kids thinking worse of the vegetables, for example, thinking vegetables are so gross that they must be hidden. It is better to be open and honest and try to get them involved in helping make the food.

Best to start early

From the beginning of introducing solids, its best to start creating healthy eating habits as the norm, because preventing fussy eating of course is better than dealing with fussy eaters at a later stage.

Generally, babies are most open to new flavours around the time of weaning, so this can be compared to the 'honeymoon phase'. Unfortunately, this may not last and at around 20 months of age (approx.) many toddlers naturally become much more wary about eating foods they do not recognise.

Food neophobia is one reason suggested for this. Food neophobia is defined as “an attitude towards food, which manifests as a persistent reluctance to eat new foods, avoiding tasting unknown products and unwillingness to accept newly introduced flavours or unknown consistency of food”.

Ref: [Food neophobia in children](#)

Neophobia often means refusing any new or unfamiliar food usually based on sight.

Research has shown that infants who were exposed to a greater variety of solid foods are less likely to reject novel foods at a later age.

Ref: [Factors Influencing Children's Eating Behaviours](#)

Likewise, babies who have not experienced different textures during their first year; may find new foods more difficult to accept, after this time. This maybe because they have not had sufficient practise with foods that are more textured such as meat and lumpy foods.

The implication is that we should offer a wide variety of food to our baby and young toddler, so that they receive more varied nutrition but also that they hopefully will continue to have a more varied diet in the future. Specifically, the period up to about 20 months of age offers a unique window of opportunity for 'setting' our little one's food preferences. It maybe more difficult to broaden their diet later, than to keep a varied diet going.

Unfortunately, poor eating habits can become ingrained over time, such as refusing to try new foods. Researchers, for example, studied the habits of children ages 4 to 9 and found that picky eaters tended to stay that way (even up to the age of 9). They recommended that parents need to start early to prevent picky eating, preferably before a child turns 2.

Ref: [Harvard Health Publishing: Study gives insight – and advice – on picky eating in children](#)

Family Time

Ideally, we all sit down together and eat as a family frequently, with the focus on time together and catching up. Ideally meals should be as much about the atmosphere, as the eating and the foods themselves. The aim is to have a light-hearted, positive atmosphere, which is enjoyable for all.

Even if our little ones are on a different schedule than us, for example, they're having their last meal before us, aim to sit down with them, have a bite or two or a drink such as tea.

Research has shown that eating meals together as a family, even if it is only once or twice a week, increases children's fruit and vegetable intake.

Ref: [Regular family meals together boost kids' fruit and vegetable intake](#)

In addition, sitting down for eating is a good habit; not just for meals, but snacks and treats too. It is obviously safer than running around. If it is not possible for us to sit down in the kitchen or dining room etc, it is still best to sit down wherever we are.

One simple way to lighten the atmosphere at mealtime is by chatting, being silly and telling jokes. Simple games can be played, such as 'Roses and Thorns' where everyone at the table has to say something good about their day and something not so good about their day. This is particularly important for young eaters who may need extra time to learn about different foods. Think simply in terms of whether everyone, including yourself, is enjoying eating together. And of course; as kids relax more, they are more likely to eat better and consume more nutritious food.

While we do not want to rush meals, do not let them drag on either, so 20 to 30 mins is a good length of time for meals (on average).

Eating Routine

It is important to set boundaries around the timing of meals and snacks, so that eating does not continue for most of the day. One idea that helps with this is to say that the kitchen is closed after eating times.

Try to establish a routine for eating, so that meals and snacks are served at roughly the same time, most days. Of course, there may be different schedules some days than others, for example, at the weekend; but the idea of this is that eating times are predictable. Then children learn that eating happens at roughly the same intervals every day and they know when next to expect food.

Maximise variety

We all need a variety of different types of foods to ensure we stay well, and even more so for young bodies that are still growing and developing so rapidly.

From a young age, introduce children to a variety of foods. It is so important that children are not always offered just the foods they really like or their favourite foods. If this is the case, what often happens is that we have to offer these same foods very often. We all have favourite foods but that is not enough reason to eat just our favourite foods all the time. If our children eat the same food too often, they probably will eventually get tired of it and not want to eat it at all anymore. Then their diet may become more and more limited, over time. Ideally, rotate through different foods on different days and try not to offer the same food more than once a day.

The Kids Healthy Eating Plate by the Harvard University is a useful way to remind us about variety when serving meals to our little ones. This reminds us that meals should comprise of more than one food group, for example, not just pasta. Ideally meals should consist of three food groups so there is protein, carbohydrate, and fruit or vegetables. This can also be applied to a substantial snack, such as after school. So instead of just serving one type of food such as fruit for snack time; a more substantial snack could be, for example, fruit, crackers and nut butter.

See handout: Kids Healthy Eating Plate

It is a good idea to serve a small portion of each of the various foods on their plate and encourage your child to have a bite of each of the foods; before they look for more food. This prevents a child filling up on their favourite food, such as pasta first; and then having no appetite for less preferable foods.

Different textures

It is important to offer lots of different textures to babies and not just purees or mashed foods. Babies who have not experienced a variety of textures during their first year, may find different textures more difficult to accept after this.

One study found that children introduced to lumpy solids after the age of 9 months ate less food groups at seven years, including fruit and vegetables, than those introduced to lumpy foods between 6–9 months. In addition, they were reported as having significantly more feeding problems at seven years of age.

Ref: [Delayed introduction of lumpy foods to children during the complementary feeding period affects child's food acceptance and feeding at 7 years of age](#)

Therefore, it is important to vary textures, to avoid the scenario where some little ones prefer to only eat crunchy foods such as crackers or foods with the one texture such as smooth yoghurt.

Playing with food

Playing with food for little ones helps them learn about food through doing such as smashing, pouring, mixing; poking, or dropping. This experiential learning means little ones are learning all about different foods, including their colours, smells, tastes, textures and sounds.

Some research has shown that children who play with their food are less likely to be picky eaters and less hesitant to try new foods and flavours. They may also be more likely to eat a varied diet.

<https://www.ovuline.com/guide/103590/the-benefits-of-toddlers-playing-with-their-food>

Activities can be very simple and quick. Examples include making faces with their food such as a pizza face and making different shapes from their food with cookie cutters. Encouraging use of their imagination often means food is more fun such as pretending broccoli is a food for dinosaurs.

Involve your child

Little ones often love to act like adults and are often happy to help in the kitchen. There are many ways to get them involved in the kitchen, depending on their age and ability. One example is chopping foods such as veggies, for example, with a kid-safe knife. These are available online from a number of providers including [The Cool Food School](#).

See handout on **Age-appropriate ways to get children involved with food**

Many children love to get involved in baking, as they can eat the food when it is baked. It is great to get them involved in baking both sweet foods but also savoury foods.

Children maybe more willing to eat foods when they have helped prepare it, for example, their packed lunches. One study, for example, of 5 to 7-year-old children found that they ate more of a food they prepared themselves; compared to the same food prepared by someone else. This meant they ate more healthy foods they prepared themselves, as well as unhealthy foods.

Ref: [Children eat more food when they prepare it themselves](#)

Any other activities that increase childrens' sense of control overeating maybe worthwhile and fun to do, such choosing a recipe or option for dinner.

Healthy Eating activities

Exposure to healthy foods can take many forms and any contact that a child has with the new food will help them to become more familiar with it and may increase their willingness to try it.

There are lots of fun activities online, including colouring, word searches etc. There are lots of activities we can do with our little ones to get them involved with healthy foods, for example naming fruits and vegetables, picking the odd one etc.

Examples of other activities include:

- Blind fold challenge – choose between two or more different foods such as two different coloured peppers to guess which sample is which colour, without peeking.
- Buy a different food every week and see who will try it and discover what it is like.
- Eat the Rainbow! The aim is to eat as many different coloured fruits and vegetables, to represent different colours of the rainbow. The rainbow image of different coloured fruits and vegetables can be used to help remind us to pick different coloured fruit and vegetables. Often, we may eat lots of some colours such as red and neglect other colours such as green or purple.

Handout: *Rainbow Fruit & veg handout*

Some good resources include:

- [Healthy Eating Advisory Service; Healthy eating games and activities](#)
- [Super Kids Nutrition; Fun Healthy Activities for Kids](#)

Persistence

Children may need to be exposed to a novel food between 6 and 15 times before a significant change in familiarity, preferences and intake are seen.

Ref: [Early Taste Experiences and Later Food Choices](#)

For some children or some foods, this number may need to be much higher.

A recent study found that repeatedly exposing children to a novel food in a positive way was especially effective in increasing children's willingness to try it. These findings suggest the importance of both the act of repeatedly exposing children to new foods and the context within which this exposure occurs.

Ref: [Early influences on the development of food preferences](#)

Yet the tendency for many of us is that we stop offering a food after a few times, if it is not eaten. One study, for example, found that the highest number of times that caregivers offered a new food before deciding the child disliked it was three to five.

Ref: [Prevalence of picky eaters among infants and toddlers and their caregivers' decisions about offering a new food](#)

This may result in us offering our children foods that they usually eat. If this pattern repeatedly continues, then they are just offered their favourite foods or foods they are most likely to eat. This is one of the ways a child's diet becomes more limited. Of course, the more limited a child's diet, the more they must be offered the same foods regularly. Then this may result in a child (or anyone) getting very tired of eating the same food all the time, so they may actually stop eating this food altogether, so their diet becomes even more limited.

Don't give up

Even though some children might be very adamant about their food dislikes, they do not always know what certain foods are really like, such as the exact texture and taste of an unfamiliar food. Therefore, parents and caregivers have a huge role in shaping our children's food preferences, for example, by exposing our children to a variety of foods. Offering our children only their preferred foods actually reinforces this pattern. Take, for example, if each time a child rejects a food it is replaced with a food that they prefer, then they are encouraged to keep rejecting less preferred foods.

In the US, the American Institute for Cancer Research have run a 'Healthy Kids Today Prevent Cancer Tomorrow Campaign' which promotes 'Super Kids'. This provides lots of tools, activities and lesson plans for healthy eating that are kid-friendly such as Taste the Rainbow, Whole-Grain Tracker, Healthy Grocery Shopping Activity. It also includes additional resources such as a Super Crew Fitness Tracker. See example below of 'Track your colours today'

KID POWER



kid power

in the house

HEALTHY KIDS TODAY

PREVENT CANCER TOMORROW

Campaign

Do you know what makes a hero?:
Super kids like you can help save lives every day!

A hero is brave, strong, caring, and thoughtful. A hero makes sure they are healthy and strong so they can take care of others. Every kid can be a hero and that means you. You can help save lives starting right now!

Be a Super Crew Kid and stop cancer and other illnesses before they start.

- Eat foods that make you smart, healthy and energized.
- Be active every day to stay strong and fit.
- Help your friends and family make healthy choices too.

Track your colors today!

purple green red orange yellow brown white black



How many colors have you eaten today? Color the shields below to show it! Aim for at least 4 colors every day.

Directions: Fill in the shields with the color of the foods you ate today for fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, beans, herbs and spices. See what colors are missing and be sure to eat them tomorrow.

Aim for at least 4 colors every day.

Super Crew Kids and the Fight-o-Chemicals!

The fight-o-chemicals (phytochemicals) in fruits and veggies are like a force field that help you fight off invaders like cancer. Eat more colorful fruits, veggies, beans and other plant foods to make your Super stronger.

Super Crew Kids know these good foods fight off bacteria, viruses and disease so you can live healthy and stay strong. Colorful fruits and veggies also give you antioxidants, vitamins and minerals that fight cancer and other diseases.

Ever wonder why fruits, vegetables and beans come in different colors?

Colors are body protectors – every food's color works a different magic on your body.

~Jessie



Make sure your family signs up for more free fun activities at www.aicr.org/healthykids

See here for more resources: <https://www.aicr.org/resources/for-families-children/>

It is important to establish healthy eating habits for young children so poor habits don't become the norm and last in the long-term.