

Optimal Nutrition for Children

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This article was written as a foundation on children's nutrition. I want your children to be healthy, to grow and thrive! If you have specific questions that this handout and the Weston A. Price Nutrition Guide are unable to answer, please make a note and bring it up at your child's next appointment.

Eating patterns established during childhood serve as the foundation for life. What we eat early on shapes brain development, metabolism, and overall health.

Nutrition affects all aspects of childhood growth and development including:

- brain development such as critical thinking skills, ability to concentrate, and have stable moods
- gut and immune health
- strong bones, flexible muscles, and healthy teeth
- optimal energy
- sound sleep
- vibrant clear skin and lustrous hair
- maintaining a healthy weight and achieving ideal stature.

Did you know that right now, the top three sources of calories for 2-3 year olds in the US are:

- milk
- fruit juice
- pasta.

Hmmm... We can build a much better foundation to provide vibrant health for our children!

Let's start with the basics.

- **Choose whole, unprocessed foods.** Avoid processed foods, especially those that are specifically marketed to children.
- **Incorporate vegetables and fruits** into your child's daily diet.
- **Supplement with vitamins and minerals if needed**, but try to get nutrients from a varied, whole-foods diet first.
- **Help children regulate their appetite and hunger cues** with whole foods and mindful eating.
- **Take the lead.** You're the parent.
- **Adopt healthy habits yourself**, so that your children have a role model for their own behavior.

Strategy #1: Choose whole, unprocessed foods.

Children are a prime target for processed food marketing. Unfortunately, these products rarely provide high quality fuel for our growing children.

Cut the Sugar.

Most parents and teachers can attest to knowing when a child has eaten sugar; as the children often have abrupt mood changes that include loud(er) voices, more tantrums, and generally less ability to smoothly navigate typical daily interactions.

Additionally, sugar disrupts children's natural appetite regulation and contributes to excess body fat, cardiovascular disease, and insulin resistance. *(More information regarding excess weight in children is included in a separate handout. Available by request.)*

Please keep in mind that added sugars aren't just found in sugary desserts and sodas, but also in many breakfast cereals, kid-friendly yogurts like "go-gurt" and Yoplait, and on the go "nutrition bars" like Clif. **Please read labels.**

When making treats at home, use medjool dates, unsweetened applesauce, honey, maple syrup, and stevia instead of sugar, brown sugar, corn syrup, agave or Splenda. (If you want recipes, I'm happy to share!)

Eat Good Fats.

Dietary fats help children absorb nutrients. They also help them feel full and satisfied after meals. And they are necessary to produce hormones (including those that regulate sleep and mood).

Dietary fats are even more critical in children than in adults. The right types of fats and the right amounts of them aid in the development of healthy brains, eyes, skin, and body composition.

Healthy fats include:

- **Oily fish.** EPA/DHA (an Omega 3 fat from oily fish which improve brain and heart function). Salmon, sardines, anchovies, albacore tuna are excellent sources. If your children don't love fish, opt for a tsp of fish oil such as Seroyal, Nordic Naturals, or Carlson's make. This can be given straight or added to fruit smoothies.
- **Nuts and seeds.** ALA (another Omega 3) is best found in nuts and seeds such as flax, walnuts, pumpkin, and chia seeds. Raw nuts can be given as snacks, or ground and added to cereals and smoothies. Nut butters such as almond, sesame, and sunflower are wonderful additions to a healthy diet.
- **Coconut.** Oil, cream, full-fat milk, unsweetened flakes. It's rich and delicious, and helps improve skin and gut health.
- **Avocados.** High in fiber, B vitamins, and potassium, avocados are an excellent energy source that improve liver function and reduce inflammation.
- **Raw butter and full-fat milk.** Fuel for the brain and bones. (Note that 5% of children are sensitive to dairy and do better consuming only butter. Request more information if you are concerned about your child having a dairy allergy.) Go to www.rawmilk.com for farms near you. At the grocery store, I love Kerry Gold butter, Strauss full fat plain yogurt, Fage full fat plain yogurt, organic non-homogenized whole milk.
- **Eggs.** Organic eggs from pastured chickens provide choline and important fats for healthy brains. I recommend soft boiled yolks only until 9-10 months of age, and whole egg thereafter. (Note that some children are allergic to eggs- generally manifests as eczema and wheezing. Request more information if you are concerned about your child having an egg allergy.)
- **Pastured beef, lamb and wild game.** High in B vitamins, protein, and omega 3s.

Grains. What's the story?

As I'm sure you are aware there is a lot of controversy over the consumption of grains. Some grains? No grains? No gluten? Whole grains?

Let me start by saying that some children are truly allergic to gluten (found in wheat, spelt, barley, and rye) and have serious health detriment from consumption of gluten. Obviously, these children should not consume gluten containing grains. Additionally, up to 50% of children with neurologic conditions such as autism, are extremely sensitive to gluten and fair much better when it is removed entirely from their diets. (If you are concerned that you or your child may have an allergy, sensitivity, or intolerance to gluten/gliadin please schedule an appointment to discuss this in greater detail.)

That aside, most children grow and thrive on a whole foods diet that incorporates whole grains. What I see is that the choice of grain, and the quantity consumed make a much larger impact than whether or not they are eaten. Additionally, many gluten-free products are highly processed, and if your child isn't sensitive to gluten eating a whole grain product (like Dave's Killer Good Seed Bread) is far more beneficial than eating gluten-free bread made of rice flour and stabilizers.

What does whole grain mean? It is when the entire kernel is still intact (bran, germ, and endosperm). Refined grains have the bran and germ removed (these are the parts that contain fiber and minerals) in an effort to make a "smoother" product (think white fluffy bread).

Preparation of grains is important since grains contain a chemical called phytic acid which acts as a mineral blocker and prevents absorption of nutrients from other foods consumed at the same time. Soaking, sprouting, and lacto-fermentation of grains significantly reduces phytic acid and makes the grains more easily digested. Nourishing Traditions by Sally Fallon is an excellent resource on ideal preparation of grains.

Additionally, more variety in the types of grains included in one's diet seems to reduce much of the ill effect some individuals experience when eating grains. Examples include brown rice, quinoa, millet, teff, oats, amaranth, buckwheat, rye and wheat if tolerated.

A few "products" I love:

- Dave's Killer Bread (especially Good Seed Light- smaller slices, perfect for kids, with lots of fiber, protein, and whole grain goodness)
- Mary's Gone Crackers & Pretzels (made from brown rice, flax, quinoa, and sesame seeds)
- Ezekial Sprouted Cereals
- Ryvita Dark Rye Crispbread

I try to use vegetables in place of pasta noodles (zucchini and squash slice into beautiful noodles on a mandolin). But on the occasion that I do opt for traditional noodles, I look for the fewest ingredients and highest fiber content.

When baking: buckwheat, almond, oat and coconut flours are ideal substitutes for some or all of the wheat flour in the recipe. Check out www.comfybelly.com for recipes!

Small Substitutions Add Up.

Simply switching to less processed, more whole foods versions of things can make a huge difference.

Look at your child's daily menu and see where you can make healthier substitutions for processed foods.

Strategy #2: Incorporate fruits and vegetables.

Adding fruits and vegetables to your child's diet is an excellent way to start improving their nutritional status.

Fruits and veggies come in their own handy packages, are easy to prepare, and full of important nutrients that growing bodies need.

Yes, I know, not all kids love vegetables right away. Here are a few tips to address common problems.

Problem: My kids don't like the taste of vegetables.

Solution: Prepare them differently. Try sauteeing, roasting, incorporating them into a soup, adding them to a fruit smoothie, or serving them raw. Season your food. Good olive oil or organic butter and a bit of sea salt go a long way to making vegetables delicious and enjoyable. Remember that it may take ten or more exposures before a child embraces a new food. Give it time, keep trying new options, and keep looking for ways to incorporate vegetables to all their meals.

Problem: Preparation seems inconvenient or difficult.

Solution: Keep prepared veggies such as prewashed baby veggies on hand. Keep your freezer stocked with frozen veggies so that when you are tired and don't feel like washing and chopping you can easily steam a bag of broccoli or green beans, add butter and sea salt and have a healthy addition to your dinner table. Involve children in preparation of veggies. Even 2 year olds can help you snap the ends off green beans, mash avocados, or tear up lettuce for a salad. The more involved they are the more likely they are to try new foods.

Problem: No access.

Solution: Keep veggies at home and school. Rearrange the fridge to make prepared vegetables accessible and less healthy alternatives harder to reach.

Problem: Peer pressure to eat non-nutritious foods.

Solution: What happens around peers stays around peers. Focus on eating better at home.

Problem: Parents aren't eating veggies.

Solution: Parents eat veggies. You had to know this was coming! 😊

Strategy #3: Vitamins and Minerals.

News flash: Nutrient-poor foods consumed in place of nutrient-rich foods can lead to nutrient deficiencies.

If a child isn't getting enough nutrients from their diet, supplementing with vitamins, minerals, and omega-3s is recommended. This is especially important in children of low socioeconomic status, symptoms of ADHD/Autism/learning disabilities, picky eaters, and children with food allergies or a history of being sick often. (Recommendations: Progressive Labs Children's Chewable Vitamin, Klaire Labs children's chewable probiotic, Fish oil- ensure 400mg DHA, Vitamin D3-1000iu/day)

The following are a list of nutrients most often lacking in children's diets, along with whole-food sources of these nutrients:

- Calcium- beans, greens, nuts, seeds
- Iron- beans, meat, greens, whole grains (*children eating a vegetarian or vegan diet may need an iron supplement*)
- Zinc- beans, meat, fish, whole grains
- Vitamin A- fruits, veggies
- Vitamin C- fruits, veggies
- Folic Acid- whole grains, beans, fruits, veggies
- Vitamin B6- meat, beans, veggies, fruits, whole grains
- Vitamin D- fish, eggs, dairy, mushrooms, sunshine (can't absorb from sun if wearing sunscreen!)
- Vitamin B12- red meat (*children eating a vegan diet will need a B12 supplement*)
- Iodine- sea vegetables, fish

Hydration.

Water and unsweetened herbal teas are the best thirst-quenchers around. They promote good hydration. Once children get used to the flavor, they tend to prefer these as they feel better when consuming them.

While cow's milk (or a substitute) is a staple in many children's diets, it is not mandatory. Using "milk" as a meal replacement can cause anemia.

Consider eliminating fruit juice in favor of whole fruit. Fruit juice is very high in sugar, causes tooth decay, and does not quench thirst. Children should not consume more than 4oz fruit juice in a day.

Try using primarily water and caffeine-free unsweetened tea as your child's beverages.

Food Sensitivities.

If your child is sensitive to a particular food and needs to eliminate it, that's okay. Just establish what nutrients the food would provide and include other foods that will make up for it (or use a supplement).

If you think your child has a true allergy, schedule an appointment so we can order the appropriate lab work to determine severity of allergy and develop a treatment plan around it.

Common food sensitivities in children include:

- Eggs
- Dairy
- Soy
- Wheat
- Peanuts
- Tree Nuts
- Shellfish

Kids and Toxins.

We're all exposed to various toxins. Having optimal nutrition will enable your child's body to eliminate toxins more efficiently. Here are a few tips to lower toxin load:

- **Try to eat organic.** Organic foods contain fewer toxins. If you are unable to purchase organic, please review this list (Updated annually by the Environmental Working Group at www.ewg.org):
 - o **Clean 15:** asparagus, avocado, cabbage, cantaloupe, sweet corn, eggplant, grapefruit, kiwi, mango, mushroom, onion, papaya, pineapple, sweet peas, sweet potatoes.
 - o **Dirty Dozen:** apples, celery, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, grapes, hot peppers, nectarines, kale/chard, peaches, potatoes, spinach, strawberries, sweet bell peppers, summer squash.
- **Avoid feeding large predatory fish to children.** They tend to contain higher amounts of toxins. (Tuna- except albacore, and swordfish are the more common ones.)
- **Check body care products.** Even common lotions, shampoos, sunscreens and toothpastes can expose your child to unnecessary risk. Go to www.ewg.org for more information.
- **Avoid BPA.** BPA is linked to increased body fat and poor health in children. It is primarily found in plastics such as can liners, water bottles, baby bottles, etc. Now that I've mentioned it I'm sure you'll see labels all over that say "NO BPA". Choose these.

Strategy #4: Help Kids Eat the Right Amount.

Given the right conditions, kids tend to be intuitive eaters. Their body cues tell them how much they need.

Some days they'll eat more, some days less. Their bodies naturally self-regulate their intake. Unless there is a true issue with growth or development, I generally find caloric counting in children to be an exhausting effort with little benefit.

However, a child's amazing ability to self-regulate food intake can be thrown awry by things like:

- Inappropriate portion sizing
- Processed foods
- Restricting foods
- Labeling foods as "bad"
- Eating while rushed, distracted, or on the go

Strategies That Don't Work.

As a parent, you undoubtedly want to make sure your kids are happy and healthy. So you might:

- Offer them food as a reward when they are upset
- Have strict rules about “good” and “bad” foods
- Push them to finish dinner
- Try bribing them (“If you finish your spinach you’ll get ice cream”)

Unfortunately, the strategies above only make things *worse*, and it is a lot more work for you.

Try These Strategies Instead.

To ensure that kids keep eating intuitively and naturally for life, I’m suggesting you try these strategies instead:

- Serve them a variety of unprocessed whole foods
- Serve appropriate portions
- Give them the illusion of choice and self-determination (“You can pick 1 vegetable you’d like to eat tonight.” If everything on the table is good for their body, it doesn’t really matter what they choose today...)
- Let kids stop when they’re no longer hungry (Instead of insisting they clear their plate)
- Avoid strict “eating rules” or references to their weight
- Don’t keep unhealthy choices in the house. Make healthy choices abundantly available. Don’t make this a big deal! Just make poor choices simply and quietly.... Unavailable.
- Involve kids in shopping, menu planning, and cooking.
- Slow down
- Eat as a family as often as possible. Make meal time family time. (Everyone should have the same options for dinner, no short order cooking please.)

Strategy #5: Take the Lead.

Parents: It is up to you to take the lead. You’re in charge here.

It’s your job to provide the food. It is the child’s choice whether to eat it. I promise, when they are hungry, they will eat.

Show them what respecting and nourishing your body looks like by eating well yourself!

Ultimately, children pay much more attention to what their parents do than say. So, set a great example, chances are your children will follow your lead.

But What About Picky Eaters?

Problem: *This is all well, you may say, but my kids won't eat vegetables no matter what!*

Solution: It's okay. Make sure they get plenty of apricots, canteloupe, mango, peaches, plums, beans, nuts, seeds, avocado, eggs, citrus, and berries.

Problem: *What about kids who don't like or can't have dairy? How about calcium?*

Solution: Make sure they get plenty of broccoli, green leafy vegetables, beans, and fish.

Problem: *My child doesn't like meat? How will they get enough protein?*

Solution: Make sure they get plenty of beans, peas, nuts, and seeds.

In other words, there's a solution for just about every potential problem!

General Guidelines.

While it might seem easiest to focus on daily servings and numbers, it's wiser to allow for flexibility. Step back and look at the big picture. A few days without 3-5 servings of vegetables is okay.

In general, aim for the following:

- Vegetables: 3-5 servings/day (serving size = fist)
- Fruit: 2-3 servings/day (serving size = fist)
- Beans/Legumes/Meat/Eggs: 2-3 servings/day (serving size = palm)
- Whole Grains: 2-3 servings/day (serving size = fist)
- Nuts/Seeds/Olives/Avocado/Coconut/Butter: 2-3 servings/day (serving size = thumb)

Summary and Recommendations.

How much should kids eat? They should eat until they are no longer hungry.

What should kids eat? A variety of mostly whole, minimally processed foods.

What should kids drink? Mostly water and unsweetened herbal tea.

How to ensure healthy bowel movements? Adequate fluid, physical activity, and whole plant foods (vegetables, fruits, beans, whole grains, nuts, and seeds).

The #1 thing you can do to help your children? Adopt healthy habits yourself!

May you and your children be vitally healthy!

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