

healthier lunches for children



What influences childhood eating patterns and food choices?

Eating patterns of children are often role modelled on what parents and those around them eat. Children are much more likely to eat if a parent / carer are eating with them rather than the food just being offered to them.

Children also need to become familiar with foods. For example, the more often a child tastes a food the more likely that child will like that food. Children may need to taste a food ten or more times before they start to like a food!

Children sometimes do not want a food one day but might be happy to eat it the next day, so keep offering a range of foods. Children may also like to eat foods in various forms. For example a child may not like cooked carrots but like to eat raw carrots. Try also different ways of cutting the food or presenting it.

Mealtime battles?

Keep meal times relaxed and happy. Make an effort to set the table and ask the children to help. This helps to make dinner a 'special' time of the day. Switch off the television and don't have toys at the table as they will be distracting. If your child is a slow eater set a time limit, say half an hour, and let your child eat during this time and after that clear the food and plates away.

Do not offer other foods as your child will learn that they only have to say 'no' to get other foods offered which might be more tempting.

Parents / carers' reactions to what and how much children eat can have a big impact on their food likes and dislikes. Using food as a reward makes the child like that particular food. Instead of using sweet, rich or salty foods as a reward try using healthier alternatives such as fruit or don't use food as a reward at all. Children like stickers and these can be given as a reward to be collected on a chart for example.

How much food is enough?

Children have different needs so the amount is dependent on your child. Let your child decide how much to eat of healthy foods but restrict foods high in fat, sugar and salt such as sweets, chocolates, crisps, fizzy drinks and so on. Encourage food to be eaten at mealtimes not at snack time. If your child is hungry offer a piece of fruit or maybe a slice of toast.

If children eat only a small portion of their meal this is OK – they are likely to make up for it over the next meal or over the next few days. As long as your child is growing well and they are active and well there should be no need to worry.

8 Ways to get children to eat a varied diet

1. Enjoy a variety of foods. Serve up a variety of healthy foods each day. These include fruit and vegetables, beans, wholegrain cereals, low fat dairy, lean meat, fish and skinless chicken. Children below the age of 2 should not be given low fat milk and milk products.
2. Shop healthy. If you haven't got a healthy variety in your kitchen cupboard or fridge, you can't put it on the table. Try avoid having 'sometimes' food such as chocolate in the cupboard as children will then see them as 'everyday' foods.
3. Go for quality, not quantity. Children servings may be small. It all depends on their age and appetite. Variety is the important ingredient.
4. Stick to three meals and two snacks daily. Growing children need to be fed regularly and often but not all the time. Don't serve snacks just before dinner as they might not be hungry at dinner time.
5. Begin each day with a healthy breakfast. It improves concentration, helps children to learn and be active in sport and playtime.
6. Give your children choice. Offer kids a few healthy choices. For instance, ask if they want an apricot or a plum, beans or broccoli, an egg or tuna sandwich.
7. Lunchboxes that go crunch. If your child has a lunchbox include a fruit and vegetable or salad. Try corn on the cob, carrots, green beans, cherry tomatoes, celery, grapes or berries.
8. Give your children fruit as a snack or with a meal. Fruit can be eaten fresh, tinned (in fruit juice), frozen, dried or as pure juice (unsweetened).

Water and dehydration

It is really important to drink enough water for everyone. Water is not only lost on hot days through sweating, but it is also lost through urine and breathing. The best fluid to drink is plain water – it stops you from becoming dehydrated, does not cause dental caries, does not contain any energy or calories, contains no caffeine and costs nothing! Give your child a bottle of water to take to school, offer water regularly at home and keep a chilled bottle in the fridge.

Not drinking enough can cause headaches, feeling unwell and tired. It also affects concentration and not being able to think clearly, children may become bad tempered, feel hungry and become clumsy. If over 5 years of age your child should drink 6 – 8 glasses a day to be able to enjoy school and be ready to learn and play.

A great way to start the day!

Don't let children skip breakfast!

- Children who skip breakfast generally won't get all the nutrients they need
- They don't get as much calcium, iron, dietary fibre and other vitamins
- They will have a poorer concentration level throughout the day at school
- They are more likely to put on excess weight
- They have less energy to work and play

Easy ideas:

- Fresh or tinned fruit (in natural juice) with wholegrain breakfast cereal and low fat milk
- Toast with cheese and tomato, or banana
- Boiled eggs with finger wholegrain toast
- Porridge oats with raisins or sultanas and low fat milk.

- Baked beans on toast
- Tub of low fat yoghurt and fresh or tinned fruit

If you are in a real rush, at least send your child with a piece of fruit or slice of toast to eat on the way.

Physical activity ideas

Fresh air and regular physical activity are essential to maintain a healthy body and mind. There are many ways to encourage activity for children and the whole family:

- If school is within walking distance, walk your child to school instead of driving
- If you have access to a window box, outdoor green space or a garden encourage your children to get involved in growing
- Encourage children and the family to help with household chores, such as vacuuming, washing windows, cleaning the car, sweeping leaves
- Make sure your child has the correct clothes for PE at school and a drink of water for afterwards
- Encourage your child to be physically active at lunchtimes or sign up for after school clubs
- Visit the park and take a cricket set, ball or Frisbee
- Learn how to ride a bike and take a bike ride
- Visit the local swimming pool
- Encourage your child to get involved in a sport at a local club
- Choose presents for children that encourage activity, such as kites, outdoor equipment, gift vouchers to outdoor activity parks

Children need to take part in 1 hour of physical activity a day, while adults need to have 30 minutes at least 5 times a week.

Waste & Litter-free lunches

Packed lunches cause an enormous amount of waste within the school. Ready made packed lunch items such as the Dairylea lunchables, individual yoghurt pots, snack wrappers, crisp packages, drink cartons and so on all add to the amount of waste produced at school.

There are numerous alternatives to plastic and foil based packaging which include: paper bags, reusable plastic containers, non-wax lunch paper or reusable lunch bag.

Instead of purchasing boxed juice or plastic drink containers, refill existing drink bottles with water from home.

Fresh fruit and vegetables often come in their own natural packaging and may not need any other or if chopped or peeled could be put in a reusable plastic container.

By reusing lunch bags you can save money, decrease demand for natural resources needed to make new bags and cut down on the amount of rubbish. So instead of using 20 – 30 plastic sandwich bags per month, try to use just one plastic container. Reusable plastic storage containers are also great to keep left-over foods stored in the fridge at home.