

Emotional Wellbeing and Diet

There possibly is not a parent amongst us who does not worry, to some extent, about what their child eats. It is one of our most important jobs as a parent to nourish our children with good food, and to monitor and limit the amount of unhealthy food they consume. It sounds like a simple plan, but for many of us it is a struggle. Children can be very particular eaters (although this is normal and to be expected as their developing tastebuds become familiar with new foods.) Children are also very susceptible to persuasive and persistent advertising both on the television, and on the supermarket shelves, where they can find colourful, inviting packages containing the very food they shouldn't really eat.

As parents, we are also susceptible to what can sometimes be relentless 'pester power' from our children. It can be very difficult to stand firm.

It is easy to believe that this type of discussion is about weight and healthy weight management, but for our article this week, we would like you to consider the powerful effects of food and drink choices on the emotional and behavioural health of your children. This is not about whether or not your child is overweight. Slim, active children can still suffer from problems with emotion regulation and behaviour (and long-term health effects) that are a direct result of diet. When children are also overweight it can impact on their self-esteem, their capacity to engage in physical activity and participate in sports, and consequently, their social and emotional health.

An article in the American Journal of Public Health (O'Neal 2014) found significant relationship between unhealthy dietary patterns and poorer mental health in children and adolescents, and a consistent relationship between good quality diet and better mental health. Consistent poor diet in childhood is, in particular, strongly linked to poor mental health in adolescence. There has been considerable research in the past that can relate disorders such as hyperactivity and ADHD in children to diet, but more recent research is examining the links between poor diet and internalising behaviours such as low mood, anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Almost all of us have fallen in to the trap at some time or another of calling sweet, unhealthy food options 'treats'. This gives our children the message that these foods are good, for good children, and to be anticipated and enjoyed as a reward. A much better way to phrase this would be to call them 'sometimes foods'. Name it up. Teach them. These are foods that, although we enjoy eating, are really not good for us, and we shouldn't eat them very often. They should only be eaten occasionally (and preferably not every day in the lunch box). The whole concept of using food as a reward system with children is fraught. It can set children up for a lifelong struggle with food choices and portion control, for example, 'I've done a really good job of this; I'm going to reward myself with a really big piece of cake.'

There are no simple solutions but we hope that the following guidelines may be useful:

- Start as young as possible. It is very difficult to persuade young tastebuds that relatively bland carrots and broccoli taste good when they are used to salty chips and sweet chocolate biscuits.
- Educate yourself. Spend some time on your smart phone researching healthy food choices for children, or the effects of a high sugar diet on children's well-being. Read the labels on the food you buy. High levels of salt and sugar are found in many processed foods. Learn to recognise words like sucrose, fructose, maltose, dextrose and galactose, which are other names for sugar, and potassium and sodium, which are other names for salt. The Better Health Channel (<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>) is a very good, easy-to-read resource.

- Learn some new recipes. Make snacks (not 'treats') that are nutrient dense and low in sugar.
- Avoid giving children and adolescents soft drink. It is extraordinarily high in sugar and food colourings. High sugar foods provide an instant hit of energy, which can cause children's behaviour to become erratic and impulsive. This can be quickly followed by a dip in blood sugar, potentially making children moody or grumpy and attention deficit. The current debate around sugar consumption, particularly for young people, is certainly worth your time investigating further. If you are interested visit YouTube to see what Australian qualified nutritionist, Michele Chevalley Hedge has to say.
- Children should avoid caffeine drinks completely. It is always a cause for concern when we see children – yes, even in the Junior School, drinking energy drinks such as Red Bull before school. There is very strong evidence to suggest that, as well as their very high sugar content, these drinks contain ingredients such as taurine and guarana that are not well understood or researched and of which the long-term effects on children are unknown. The caffeine content of these drinks is very high and this is known to put young people at higher risk of serious health complications. These drinks are not permitted in the Junior School and are actively discouraged in the Senior School.
- Encourage children to choose water as their preferred drink.
- Let treats for your children be unrelated to food. Instead, read them a story, allow a special TV show, take them to the park, have a visit to the local library, spend time in the backyard with them kicking the soccer ball. We can hear the collective cry, 'How do I find time?' Our response is that it is time with you that is really the best treat you can give your child. Children do not need to have a 'treat' in their lunchbox every day.
- Continue to introduce new foods as your children grow and their tastebuds develop. Teach them that their tastebuds change, and encourage them to revisit flavours and foods they may have rejected when they were younger.
- Sweet treats, especially those in small individual packs, are relatively expensive. If you can afford these from time to time, maybe you could buy a packet of blueberries or raspberries for a special treat instead.
- Involve children in meal preparation where possible. Talk to them about food and where it grows and where it comes from. Teach them about what is seasonal, fresh and local. Their interest may surprise you.
- Keep it simple. For example, young children don't really need to know about vitamins and minerals, but they can be encouraged to enjoy different coloured foods.
- There is evidence that suggests children and adolescents may also seek unhealthy food options as comfort food when they are feeling low, and this too is a learned behaviour. Think about what comfort food looks like at your house, and what you offer your child to cheer them up. Could it/should it be replaced?
- Focus on the present when talking to children about the effects of eating good food; being strong, growing well, having energy to play, rather than on the long-term benefits which are too abstract for young children.
- Finally and importantly, model the behaviours you want to see in your children. Research shows that what you eat and do influences children's habits more than what you say. Let the good choices be for the whole family, not just the children. Good eating habits are most easily modelled by eating together as a family. We acknowledge that wellbeing is not all about the food. There are other factors such as environment, demographics, genetics, physical exercise, screen time and family connectedness which impact on a child, and these are all conversations for another day.

Developing good mental health is a key part of childhood and dietary choices do make a major contribution to the overall physical and mental wellbeing of your child.

Furthermore, it is a factor within your power to control. It is your responsibility to educate and monitor your children and provide good choices for them, hereby providing a solid protective factor against other factors, which may be beyond your control.

The following websites were referenced in the development of this article:

O'Neal, A (2014), 'Relationship between diet and mental health in children and adolescents', American Journal for Public Health, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/healthy>

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