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MAKING THE GOOD FOOD CHOICE

It's back to school for the little ones and it is important to start the year right with the proper nutrition. **SC** breaks down the basics of nutrition for children as well as friendly food options in school. BY **JACLYN REUTENS** CLINICAL DIETITIAN, APTIMA NUTRITION & SPORTS CONSULTANTS

It's no secret. Fast food, preferably fried is usually the option that most children will reach for when they have a choice. However this can lead to long term unwanted consequences on health, both physically and mentally. Thus, it is important to teach children to make the choices when it comes to their food, especially when they have the freedom to choose such as when in school.

Basic healthy eating for children

For children, healthy eating practices are based on a good mix of wholegrains, fresh fruit, vegetables, lean meat, chicken, fish, beans and high calcium foods such as low fat milk, cheese, yoghurt and soya milk.

This should be practised at home as well as in school. Variety in food is good, but what ultimately makes a food healthier than another is the amount of fat, sugar, fibre and sodium. And a healthier food choice has lower amounts of fat, sugar and sodium and a higher content of fibre.

Not all fat is bad

Though most of us associate fat with something that we should avoid at all costs when it comes to food, children need to have fat in their diet. Fat serves many functional roles in the body such as carrying vitamins A, D, E and K as well as having healthy skin and hair. However, what we need to do is to limit the amount of fat, especially saturated fat because that is the cause of future health problems.

What parents can do is to teach their children how to identify visible and hidden fats in foods. Visible fats are found in foods that have been deep fried and are characterised by a battered or crumbed coating, for example in fish fingers, fish and chips or chicken nuggets.

Hidden fats on the other hand would be cakes, doughnuts, savoury or sweet pastries like curry puffs, processed meats such as sausages, as well as sandwich fillings with mayonnaise. It is advisable to limit the consumption of these foods and allow kids to only consume such treats no more than twice a week.

Be wary of added sugar

Sugar is a carbohydrate, the body's main source of energy. However, this is different from added sugar, also known as table sugar, which you would want to limit.

This is as too much added sugar can lead to tooth decay and hyperactivity as well as a lack of concentration in class. In general, sugary foods usually have a poor nutritional value with little or no minerals or vitamins, and you should teach your child where added sugar is typically found.

Eat healthy in the school canteen

Encourage your young ones to make the nutritious choice at the different school stalls

Chinese stall: Wonton noodle soup, bee hoon soup, fishball soup, macaroni soup, rice with one meat dish and vegetables

Western stall: Spaghetti with bolognese sauce, burger without the French fries and mayonnaise, thin crust pizza with salad, baked beans and baked potato

Muslim stall: Mee siam, rice with one meat dish and vegetables

Snack stall: Wholemeal biscuits, wholemeal sandwiches, red bean bun, fresh fruit, low fat yoghurt

Drinks stall: Water, low fat milk, unsweetened juices, calcium fortified soya milk



Healthy and nutritious snacks that children can bring from home to school

- ★ Wholemeal sandwich with the following choices of fillings: tuna with cucumber, mashed boiled egg, peanut butter and nutella. Sandwich should be made without mayonnaise or butter. Use cookie cutters to cut out interesting shapes
- ★ Pita bread/tortilla wrap with leftover chicken with lettuce and tomato
- ★ Wholemeal biscuits with a small packet of UHT milk
- ★ Cheese slices with crackers and fruit.
- ★ Home made wholemeal muffins
- ★ Muesli or breakfast bars that are not sugar or chocolate coated
- ★ Rice cakes with cheese sticks



Added sugar is typically present in canned drinks, sweetened beverages, syrupy drinks, chocolate, sweets, hard candies, ice cream, cakes with icing, kuchs, jellies and cookies. However similar to fatty foods, your child should be allowed the occasional ice cream or birthday cake in school.

Another type of food to teach children to be wary of is highly salted food as very salty food tends to also be high in fat and sometimes sugar. Examples are sausages, luncheon meat, pepperoni, ham, tomato sauce, chilli sauce, potato chips and savoury pies. Teach your child to detect very salty foods and usually they would feel exceptionally thirsty after eating it.

The Essentials – Calcium, Fibre and Water

High calcium foods are required for healthy bones and teeth, especially as little children are developing all the time. They should eat at least one serving of low fat dairy foods a day – an equivalent to 250 ml of milk or calcium fortified soya milk, 150 g of yoghurt and two slices of cheese. Engage your child to increase the amount of calcium in his daily diet by pouring his own milk or giving him the option of pick out his favourite yoghurt flavour at the supermarket.

Encourage them to eat more fruits and vegetables which contain fibre. Fibre is necessary for healthy bowel movements as well as controlling unhealthy snack cravings.

It is not difficult to incorporate fibre in a child's diet. You can suggest to them to either have a piece of fruit as a dessert after their main dish. Vegetables are also usually found in the main dish when they order food and it is good for them to make it a habit to ask for more to be added in their dish. Another alternative to increasing their fibre intake would be to encourage them to take more wholemeal and wholegrain foods such as brown rice.

Also urge your child to drink plain water most of the time. Give them a water bottle to bring to school and make sure they refill it at least once throughout the whole day. Keep sweetened juices, cola drinks, added sugar drinks to a minimum or if possible, not at all.

Be the role model

As children often model after their parents, it is important for grown-ups to send the right message of healthy eating to their child, where it is about getting the right balance of nutrients to grow up healthier and stronger. We should also take caution to avoid using negative words and phrases such as "you are fat" and "obese", when talking to children about their diet.

Make the effort to choose food that you would want them to pick when going out with them on family outings. This way, it will become natural for them to do so even when you are not around. This would include choosing soupy foods and steamed items over fried foods.

You could also include your child in your food shopping trips and talk to them about the nutritional content as you pick foods. Play games with them by asking them to guess what a particular food is high in. Another option is to allow them to pick their own snacks and reward them when they make the healthier choice.

By teaching and embodying healthier choices in everyday living, you will be building the foundation for the long-term well-being for both your little one and your family. ☆