

Tips for Parents: Nutrition and Learning

How can eating well improve your child's ability to learn? The answer is simple. Good nutrition creates better health and healthy children learn better. They have more energy to get through a full day of school and they're able to complete their work.

Why is a healthy diet important for learning?

Healthy children interact with the environment better. With proper nutrition, children have more energy to talk and play with schoolmates and they also have more energy to explore the world around them. Children have a natural curiosity to investigate and discover the environment. Without a healthy diet, children aren't provided with enough energy to satisfy this natural curiosity.

A healthy diet provides the necessary elements for healthy development of the brain.

Protein and iron are two essential food elements for proper functioning of the brain. Protein is crucial for healthy brain cell growth and iron is necessary to bring oxygen to the brain. Without sufficient amounts of iron, children can develop anemia which reduces the capacity of blood to carry oxygen. Some good sources of protein are fish, fowl, meat, dairy products, and nuts. For iron, try dark green leafy vegetables, eggs, or meats.

A healthy diet leads to better concentration in the classroom. When children eat too much sugar, they have difficulty sitting still and short-term memory is affected. Therefore, stay away from foods high in sugar such as candy, cookies, sweetened fruit drinks, and canned fruits. Also, avoid foods that contain caffeine such as chocolate and soft drinks since they over stimulate children and disrupt concentration.

You can improve your child's ability to learn through good nutrition. Here's how:

Make sure your child's day begins with a nutritious breakfast. This includes bread or cereal, juice or fruit, and milk with meat, eggs, or cheese. Instead of the usual white bread, try whole-grain breads for more fiber. When purchasing breads, read labels carefully since not all dark breads are made from wholegrain. Also, check cereal labels for fat, sugar, and sodium content. For beverages, serve fruit juice that is made from 100 percent juice rather than sweetened fruit drinks. Real fruit juice contains less sugar and will not disrupt your child's ability to concentrate in school.

Pack a well balanced lunch. Include fresh fruit or vegetables, enriched breads or grains, lean meat, poultry, or fish, and low fat milk, cheese, or yogurt. Create interest by having your

children help with the grocery shopping and preparing their own lunches. Use enriched breads since these provide more energy, vitamins, and iron. They are also typically lower in fat. When purchasing sandwich meats, select lean roast meat, poultry, or fish rather than cured or processed meats. Processed meats such as ham and bacon contain high amounts of sodium.

Pack only healthy desserts or snacks. Instead of buying sweets, make your own with less sugar and fat. Use whole-grain flours and oatmeal along with dried fruits to add more fiber and nutrients to a recipe. For example, try baking oatmeal applesauce cookies instead of chocolate chip cookies. When you do purchase snack foods, be sure to select lower fat cookies such as graham crackers or ginger snaps. For afternoon snacks, pack plain popcorn in place of potato chips to cut back on fat or sodium.

Beyond the kitchen

Read and learn about nutrition. Once you learn the basics about proper nutrition and healthier food alternatives, you and your family can begin to live a healthier, more productive life.

Serve as a role model. Demonstrate the importance of good eating habits by eating healthy yourself. Once you learn about proper nutrition, invite family members to help in planning healthy meals. This is one way children can learn first-hand the importance of a well balanced diet.

Contact your child's school. Make sure that teachers are incorporating nutrition lessons into classroom curriculum. If there are vending machines at school, ask school authorities to replace candy with healthier snacks such as fruits or nuts. Also, request that school fundraising projects sell things other than candy or sweets.

For more information:

Nutrition games and activities for kids-
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/eatsmartplayhardkids/>

“Lead by Example” parent and child nutrition ideas from the USDA-
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/eatsmartplayhardhealthy lifestyle/Default.htm>

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