

## Nutrition 101 For Your Kids - What Should You Feed Them?

I presume that reading this heading was accompanied by some rolling of your eyes and then followed by a smile; as is usually the case when we think of our little ones. I couldn't think of a better way to sum up this species than this definition I came across recently:

**Toddler (n.)** - *Emotionally unstable pint-sized dictators who know exactly how far to push you towards utter insanity before reverting to a loveable creature.*

Some of you may argue that this applies to some grown-ups you know too, but I digress. Now that we agree what we are up against, here's a thought - it does not have you be you vs them. All we need is a plan!

Oscar Wilde had it right "Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes". Believe me, I have a lot of 'experience' here and what follows is knowledge that emerged from these battles.

Before we go any further, let's acknowledge something - it is NOT normal for kids to fall sick multiple times a year. Yes we have no idea what they really eat at school (hint...friend's snack box) or what latest infection was lovingly brought to school by one of their friends. It still does not have to mean that they come down often with a week's illness (and you needing a holiday after).

If this is happening often, their body is sending them (and you) a message! Something must change and it's almost always what they eat and some more sleep.

What to feed them, you ask? Think of them as if they are little humans; hold on....they ARE little humans. So that mystery is solved, feed them real food! Let's get technical now, what is real food? It's close to what your grandparents ate - think rice, vegetables, eggs, meat, fruit, milk, yoghurt, butter. And don't forget water. The things we think of as food - stuff that spoils if you don't eat it quick. Or put differently, don't eat like a commercial!

Let's be honest, you knew all this already. So let's get down to how we put this theory into practise. Let's tackle this with a few strategies split between:

- 'Home'; ie when you see your kids or at least know they're at home; and
- 'Away' - when you haven't the foggiest idea what they are up to.

### Home

**You have control:** Yes it's a big world out there and companies and trying to push poor quality food down all our throats. But remember - what you (yes that's you mom and dad) shop for decides what the kids eat (for the most part anyway). So you do have control! What you need is a plan.

**Eating is a 'family thing'** - How does the family eat? Kids will do as the family 'does' (and not 'says') so look closely at what's on the table and what the grown-ups eat. There is such a thing as genetics but their family environment is by far the most significant influence on their health. Its really rare you see an overweight child in an otherwise healthy family, so own up - eating is a team sport!

**Out of sight IS out of mind** - What's lying around at home and can be eaten? Does your kitchen counter, cupboard and fridge look like an advert for a fast food company? Remember - if it's not at home, they can't eat it! Sure they can go to the nearby store and always buy some, but let's face it - children make thoughtful eating decisions in all of 3 seconds. So give them choices - just all good ones. Swap what you have on the kitchen counter, cupboard and fridge (especially front rows) with cut veggies (cucumber/carrots), fruit, nuts, hummus, unflavoured yoghurt, cheese and you will find that's all they will end up eating. As a side effect - you will eat better too!

**Set a few simple ground rules:** Here's a couple I like. (1) Don't eat while watching TV (after is ok, not during a meal). If that's not possible, fill their plates before they sit down to eat so you know how much they are eating. (2) No eating from the box/packet/container - they can serve out how much they want to eat and take that out of the kitchen. No mindless eating from bottomless bowls!

### **Make it fun:**

- Don't think "nutrition, hydration and exercise"; it's "food, water and play"
- No need for big words like "carbohydrates", "protein", "saturated fat" or "fiber"; either the food makes them big/strong/fast/clever or it doesn't; that's all there is to it - now that they know, let them choose!
- Kids are motivated by fun - nothing better than messy play. Let them cook and bake! And it doesn't have to be cake - try zucchini pasta, cookie cutters for veggies, get creative!
- Use role models they will relate to: What would Batman (or superhero/character of their choice) eat??
- When was the last time they went to the vegetable/fruit shop? Give them a list and let them shop - who does it first wins!
- Have them read a food label for a popular junk food - can make for a good afternoon's entertainment as they learn to spell all 25 ingredients and discover it can last for a year! On a more serious note, they will register what this means, just be subtle about it!

**Eating out:** - Get adventurous and try new (and healthy) options. Kids won't know what they're missing unless they see it and reading things from a menu doesn't make it fun. So order away for yourself - they are curious and will try new things. There is a lot more to good eating than broccoli!

## **Away**

**Stop fretting:** Firstly, stop worrying about what you cannot control - there will always be the junk snack they 'swap' with their school friends (and likely won't tell you either!). Think about what you CAN control!

**Get sneaky (in a nice way)** - Here are some strategies I really like:

- Give them a snack before they go to a party (of any kind). You will be surprised how 'wisely' they choose once they're not deciding their meals in 'I'm famished' mode!
- Kids have busy schedules, so hard-wire the good foods into their busy lives. On most days, you can watch them eating breakfast and dinner, so make sure those meals are made up of good quality foods. Pack a good lunch and snack. On the worst of days, they'll swap their snack and lunch, but that's not going to happen a lot. You don't need to win all the battles, winning most will do!

**Accessorize!** - Kids (and we) love our accessories. So use it to your advantage and make sure they feel good about food. Some things that work well are water bottles, snack boxes and lunch bags with their favorite characters. That way they'll carry them around and feel good about showing it off to their friends. The same goes for plates, spoons and forks at home too.

**Don't judge** - Talk about what they ate when they were with friends. Don't criticise or judge, let them know they can talk to you about it. Praise them if they chose well ('well' is relative!). Your participation and your praise count, big-time! You also get 'in' on what they're doing, which is a good perk! Also, plan treats and enjoy them as a family!

## Sleep

While this has little to do with nutrition directly, it is an important point. This one is simple (I said simple, not easy). More is better. Ideally, they should be waking up without an alarm (or threats of physical abuse from you). Sleeping early will happen if dinner is early (and so on), so move their clock back a little and bring everything forward. Dim the lights in their rooms (and the house) after sunset and you will be surprised at how early the yawns start; just be sure to sleep after they do.

## Still skeptic?

I hear some skeptics - "I've tried it all and nothing works". No you haven't tried it all - go back to the start of this article and do all the little things often and the tide will turn. Think of children like plants - feed them, water them, show them some sun - and they will grow well!

*Author Note:* This article was written by **Kannan Raman** for The Quad.