



Growing Up ... Naturally!



Incorporating New Information on Children's Nutrition into Your Family

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Nutrition research is constantly revealing interesting and often useful information that can help children better their nutrition health, and perhaps improve quality and length of life. While most nutrition research findings are based on adult studies, it is important to realize that they are often not applicable to infants and children, and that age/life stage research is necessary to reveal any differences, maintain safe practices and to help maximize nutritional health.

Following are a few recent studies that may help improve our knowledge and awareness of the uniqueness and importance of nutritional studies aimed directly at children. Also are some suggestions as to how you may implement the findings of those studies into your children's lives.

Preschoolers eating more fiber have a more nutrient dense diet.

Diets high in fiber are known to have many health benefits, including decreased risk for some cancers, obesity and heart disease. Evidence suggests that children with low fiber diets are at risk for chronic constipation. Therefore, the American Academy of Pediatrics adopted an 'age plus five' rule as a guideline for how many grams of fiber a child should be eating every day. A child's age plus 5 is the number of grams recommended. For example, a three year old should be getting 3 + 5, or 8 grams of fiber.

In order to understand the fiber intake patterns of children researchers at Penn State University surveyed and analyzed the dietary intake of 5500 children ages 2 to 5. The analysis showed that children prefer less fiber dense foods and got most of their fiber from low fiber foods like applesauce and fruit cocktail. Most children did not meet the recommended intake. Children who got the most fiber had more nutritious diets that were higher in fruits, vegetables and whole grains and lower in fat. Their diets were higher in iron, folate, vitamin A and vitamin C than those children getting the least amount of fiber. Researchers concluded that getting more fiber into a child's diet might help improve diet quality because higher fiber diets are more nutrient dense. This is true when the fiber comes from food sources, not supplements.

The challenge is for parents to learn how to increase the amount of fiber rich foods in their children's diet. Some suggestions include serving more whole, unprocessed fruits and vegetables, such as whole, unpeeled apple slices instead of applesauce. Apple slices can be made more appealing (and nutritious) by adding some peanut butter or providing a honey sweetened yogurt dip. Add one serving of fresh fruits or vegetables to each meal. Some high fiber fruits and vegetables include oranges, pears, berries, broccoli, corn, carrots, and peas. Just one



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serving of these will add up to 3 grams of fiber. Substitute whole grain products for processed white grains, such as brown rice instead of white, whole wheat bread for white bread and whole grain cereals instead of highly processed/highly sweetened cereals. A changeover to whole-grain breads, cereals, and rice adds about 2.5g of fiber per serving. Use fruits and vegetables for snacks instead of packaged snack products. Serve dried fruits for sweets, such as raisins, dried apricots or prunes. Fiber intake should be increased gradually while simultaneously increasing the intake of water. Since dietary fiber increases water retention in the colon, resulting in bulkier, softer stools, water/fluid intake should be increased along with increases in dietary fiber. About 6-8 cups a day of fluid are needed for children to produce soft bulky stools. Children more readily accept slow gradual changes, so don't make sudden or dramatic changes in fiber intake. Children will eat more fruits and vegetables if they see the other family members also doing so. Therefore, you need to model the behaviors/dietary patterns you are trying to establish in your children.

Perceptions of body images are formed early in life

While most studies on body image and dissatisfaction had been focused on adolescents, there is increased curiosity on the origins of those distorted views. Researchers at John Hopkins University looked at the association between body image and weight amongst a diverse group of 524 fourth grade students. Their study (published in the July 2004 Journal of the American Dietetic Association) showed well-developed perceptions of body image at this age. These perceptions differed based on cultural standards for beauty. Children in suburban and rural locations were more desirous of a smaller figure. Urban children tended to be more satisfied with their body size than the other children. However, there was no difference in weight of the children in this study between the geographic locations. While the researchers did not point out the origins of these perceptions (i.e. did not study specific parental or societal influences) they did clearly show that by the fourth grade, body images are well developed. This suggests that parents need to be aware and need to take appropriate and positive steps to ensure their children develop positive self-images. Many child development specialists offer suggestions on doing this. From a nutritional, dietary viewpoint, this means treating food as a means toward health and vitality and not as a means to a certain body type, such as thinner or heavier. Parents should focus on the health promoting aspects of a child's diet, for example: certain foods will give them energy, other foods promote keen eyesight, and some foods build strong bones. The weight control aspect of foods should be downplayed. The development of a positive body image is an important and complex process. The Sesame Street web site offers ideas to help <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/parents/advice/article.php?contentId=85980> Cultural pressures which impose unrealistic ideals on our children must be counteracted beginning at a very young age with strong and consistent messages that help children to appreciate and accept their unique body.

Food Messages in Children's Picture Books

It's important to recognize the abundance of factors that influence children's food preferences, such as parent modeling, cultural norms, and the media. The exposure of young children to media and advertising influences has been the subject of lots of research, yet the role of storybooks has been relatively neglected. However storybooks may have just as significant a role in forming food preferences. Taking into account the fact that they may be read slowly, over and over again and allow for close interactive communication between the adult reader and the child it seems reasonable that food messages in children's books may play a formative role in

food attitudes and preferences. A study from The University of Wisconsin and published in The Journal of The American Dietetic Association revealed enlightening numbers as to references to foods in some of the best selling children's books. While the study did not look into the influences these books had on children's eating behaviors, simply becoming aware of the type of foods mentioned and the frequency may help. Parents can choose to make comments about the food, may choose to not read the book, or not read the book so often, or make the conscience effort to include more books that contain more healthful food messages as a way of countering some of the more negative ones they come across.

In this study, 114 storybooks were chosen and coded according to the nutritional value of the food mentioned in the story. In total, 75% of the 114 books (82 books) made mention of at least one food. Thirteen percent mentioned food five or more times. Thirty eight percent of the foods mentioned were "anytime" foods, meaning they contained little or no fat, saturated fat, salt or sugar and were minimally processed. The most common were apples and juices. Thirty three percent of the foods mentioned were classified as "seldom" foods meaning they were higher in fat, added sugar and salt. The most common "seldom" foods mentioned were cake, cookies and ice cream. Foods that were associated with fun in the stories were more apt to be "seldom" foods than "anytime" foods.

Vegetables were mentioned much less often than fruits

Researchers recommend that more research is needed to assess the extent to which food in story books influence children's food preferences. Researches continue on to alert parents to the fact that both direct food mentions as well as subtle messages, such as associating a negative connotation to a character eating or preferring vegetables may be detrimental to children's dietary choices.

By being aware of the food messages in the books you read with your children, you can actively direct the impact you wish those messages to have on your children.