



Nutrition for Parents

We all want to feed our children well, but every parent knows how difficult it can be to find meals that the whole family like and will eat! Parents play an important role in shaping children's eating habits, behaviours and interest in food. Children need the right variety of food containing sufficient energy, protein and other nutrients to support their growth and development.

Eating healthy every day can be challenging for busy families, however good habits will stay with children for life so it's important for families to establish healthy eating routines. The amount of food a child needs depends on their age and activity levels. Providing children with a **variety of food from the different food groups**, will ensure they get the nutrients they need. These include:

1. fruit & vegetables
2. wholegrains
3. dairy
4. lean protein
5. healthy fats

Involve children in the planning

Let them have some choices and by including them in the preparing of meals. Children need to see and taste food at least ten times before they accept them. Collect family favourite recipes that everyone enjoys, to make meal planning easier. Plan your meals for the week ahead, that way they can choose some of the food and there are no surprises at mealtimes.

A balanced breakfast

A balanced breakfast is essential to set children up for the day. Take a few minutes to sit down together for breakfast, as often as possible. If they see you eat, they are more likely to eat. It can help to get things ready the night before if you have little time in the morning. Ensure that breakfast is low in sugar, salt and fat by checking the labels on packaged items such as cereal boxes and yoghurt pots. If your child doesn't want breakfast, encourage them to have something smaller like a piece of fruit & yoghurt.

A healthy lunch

Prepare a healthy lunch together that your child will eat and enjoy. Keep lunches interesting by choosing weekend days or holidays for trying new foods to include. Also ensure they pack enough liquids to stay hydrated, ideally water.

Dinner

Dinner should include 3-4 foods from the different food groups, such as turkey burgers with potato wedges and two veg or garlic & herb chicken with roasted veg and pasta. Try to make one meal for the whole family. This can be tricky with picky eaters and children of different ages, however eating the same meal is important for healthy habits. Let children choose by having “family style” meals where everyone can help themselves. For fussy eaters, you can keep the foods separate on their plate. For smaller children, you can chop or puree the meal into the appropriate consistency. Reduce power struggles at mealtimes by not pressuring them to finish their plate or eat foods that they dislike. However, it is up to parents to choose what foods to offer and when, then children can decide how much or whether they want to eat.

Meal planning as a family can save time and money, while ensuring you have a nutritious meal most evenings. Processed foods can be convenient but making your own is much healthier and can be made easy with some forward planning and preparation. Tips for meal planning include:

1. Cooking some meals in larger amounts so that you can get another meal out of it, particularly for extra busy days.
2. Anticipating very busy days, where a simple and easy meal can be prepared in advance.
3. Getting children involved with meal preparation, this may encourage them to eat what they have made and try new foods.

Sit down to eat together as a family as often as possible and limit eating meals in front of the tv, to focus on each other.



Snacks

Finally, healthy snacks are also important for growing children. Snacks can help keep up their energy between meals, particularly if they are very active. Healthy snacks include:

1. Yoghurts
2. Fruit
3. A handful of unsalted nuts
4. Vegetable sticks with hummus
5. Cheese with crackers
6. Rice cakes
7. Hard boiled eggs
8. Toast with peanut butter.

Treats should be limited to special occasions, weekend or when out and shouldn't be the only rewards used for good behaviour. However, even treats can form part of a balance diet, so don't demonise unhealthy treats as this will only make them more attractive.

Making small changes to your child's diet can make a big difference to their future health. If you're eating healthy, it's more likely that they will too. However, let's not forget that we all have days when feeding our family doesn't go according to plan so celebrate the small wins and remember that fed is best!

If you have any questions about how Food Choice can help your organisation, please contact Dr Fiona Geaney today at f.geaney@foodchoiceatwork.com to set up a call.