



RAISING HEALTHY KIDS

By Louise Elliott

When kids are fed to be sick... And how to feed them well again! Last year, when over half of children surveyed said that (the same) carrots in a McDonald's bag tasted better than in a plain bag, the Western world took a step back.

The glaringly fact that our children had become pawns in the multi-national games of marketing manipulation, shook parents to the bone.

Deepening the gravity, news arose stating diabetes in children was alarmingly rising and that Aussie kids were amongst the fattest in the world. Coupled with reports that our children would be the first generation not to outlive their parents, sent the Australian public into a spin!

How had our nation become a minefield, where we were raising juvenile timebombs for sickness, disease and early death? Did we need to revisit our colonial past, where children were fed on wholesome, home-made meals and accustomed to chores and hard work? Have we lost our historically-shaped, international image as

'strong, healthy, life-zealous Aussies?'

It is true the government needs to regulate junk food advertising during children's television time-slots. It is a surety that educational authorities shouldn't allow tuckshops to sell unhealthy meals. Yes, it does increase the battle when supermarkets and service stations stock lollies and chips near checkout counters. But the onus lies with us in the end - the parents - ensuring we prioritise healthy meals, and that we dedicate ourselves to furthering health education.

So let's start with the basics.

Fruit, vegetables, grains, legumes and meat carry micronutrients, like vitamins and minerals; and macronutrients, like carbohydrates, protein and fats. Fruit and vegetables particularly, contain literally thousands of phytonutrients ('phyto' meaning plant). These special

nutrients, like antioxidants, are scientifically proven and medically accepted to prevent disease.

There are many, different phytochemicals contained in each individual fruit and vegetable, so feed your child a wide variety. Eating one or two types isn't enough!

Raw fruit and vegetables are better for you and your children than cooked, as heat destroys most vital nutrients. Dehydrated fruits and vegetables are fine (like fruit straps and 100% vegetable chips), because they are specially heated to a safe temperature that only removes the water content, but not the nutrients.

One statement easier said than done is, "It doesn't matter how you do it, just get the fruit and vegetables in!" So consider the following tips for encouraging healthy eating.

Involvement: Ask for your child's help in preparation. Involve toddlers by allowing them to arrange vegetable sticks on a plate, or to pass you ingredients when needed. For older children, purchase a healthy Kid's Cookbook or compile your own, and allow them to cook a family meal. Encourage a child to be involved in grocery shopping, and take interest in their suggestions for meal ideas.

Teach your child the origin of each food and how your own parent/grandparent used it in meals. Introduce a developmental goal to reach for, like "soon you'll be able to cut a sandwich like me." Most importantly, inform them of what benefit the foods will have on their body. By the time they are adults, cooking will not be chore or a mystery, but preparing healthy meals will be second-nature.

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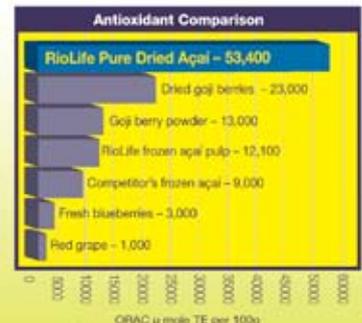
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Distraction: Taste the food as you prepare it. This is especially important with young children as they will usually follow suit.

Distract finicky taste-buds by doing an activity or engaging them in an interesting conversation: when you hand them a piece of healthy food, they'll eat along without realising it! If your child is watching television or doing their homework, leave a bowl of healthy snacks beside them without saying so, and they'll eat them as an automatic response!

Disguise: If a child is fussy, encourage their healthy eating with a flavour disguise. For instance, dip vegetable sticks and crackers in hummus, nut butters, salsa, olive oil and sesame seeds, natural yoghurt, or tomato sauce. In fact, an organic tomato sauce is one food that can be "overdosed" on! [Ordinary tomato sauce is generally high in sugar, artificial additives and preservatives.]

Another way to disguise vegetables is in soups, stews, pizzas, and noodle and rice dishes. Pureeing cooked vegetables and adding them to a bolognese sauce will disguise the appearance, but will ensure nutritional benefits.

Fruits can be disguised in smoothies,

pureed into iceblocks, put into muffins or desserts, eaten as dried (dehydrated) fruit treats, or covered in yoghurt.

Presentation: Despite a person's age, food always tastes better when it is presented in an appealing matter. This of great importance during childhood where young lives are stimulated by colour, shapes, texture and fun! When preparing meals, think: colourful, interesting and happy!

Frequently introduce new foods. Like toys, a child will get bored of his/her favourite food if it is continually presented. On a scientific note, it sometimes takes up to ten tasting experiences before 2 to 5 year olds accept a new food. The earlier you start introducing foods, the less fussy your child will grow up to be.

Sweet-tooths: Sugar is like a drug to adults, even more-so to children, and we can all suffer similar withdrawal symptoms: anger, irritability, inability to concentrate, an overwhelming "need" for more! However, children generally have less emotional maturity to cope with ill-feelings.

A way to relieve sugar "ups and downs" is to ensure meals contain some protein, which stabilises blood

sugar levels. For example, when making muffins substitute half the flour for high-protein, almond meal; or add two eggs rather than one to the mixture. If seeking to sweeten a recipe, use a naturally-low glycaemic sweetener like Stevia or Xylitol, which doesn't raise blood sugar levels considerably.

Reinforcements: Positive reinforcements can go a long way when coercing a child to eat healthy foods. Verbal praise, goal charts, non-food rewards, and the allowance to have a favourite pastime, all work a 'treat'!

Children also tend to copy parent's and older sibling's behaviour, so if the people around them are enjoying the food, then the child will usually follow.

Other healthy meal tips: Healthy oils are important for brain development, vitamin absorption, skin condition and regulating hormones. Feed your child fish weekly or give fish oil capsules, and add olive or flaxseed oil to salads.

Eat fruits and vegetables with the skin left on if possible, for many nutrients lie just under the surface.

In recipes, consider using flours that come from other grains, like: spelt, rice, quinoa, buckwheat or millet.

Each of these flours have better nutritional value than wheat flour (from which allergies can arise).

If giving food treats, choose ones that still have nourishment within, like: healthy, home-made cakes and cookies; fruit ice-creams or ice-blocks, chocolate covered Goji berries (a great superfood); yoghurt-covered apricots, pancakes topped with 100% fruit preserve.

Go home-made rather than pre-prepared meals. It takes extra effort, yes, but if you keep in mind the reason you are doing it will help you justify the means!

Remember, when it comes to fruit and vegetables: 'some is better than none' and 'some more is better than before!'

The display of your attitude towards health issues is paramount to your child developing respect for their body, and the ability later in life to discriminate between beneficial and non-beneficial foods. Your child's health depends on you! ■

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