

feature

Love at first bite:
**FIRST
STEPS IN
HEALTHY
EATING**



Dietitian **Cindy Williams** offers advice for parents of toddlers on how to develop a love of healthy food.

"I DON'T LIKE carrots; I want animal biscuits!" My three year old nephew screamed as his grandmother and aunty unsuccessfully tried to feed him dinner. "You need to eat something healthy. Here, just try a tiny bit of this yummy mashed potato." "No – I want pasta!" For 20 minutes we struggled. Tears were falling, tempers were rising, time-out hadn't worked. Then against every

sense of healthy eating we gave in. "Hey, we're not the parents. Our sanity is more important than meat and veges." So we served plain pasta (no sauce allowed) artistically surrounded by coloured animal biscuits, poured ourselves some wine, and finally relaxed.

Every parent has moments like this – where giving in is easier than taking a stand. Sometimes we have to do this for our emotional health and sometimes for social reasons – to avoid World War 3 at the café! But making the effort to teach our kids healthy eating habits is one of the best gifts we can give them for their long-term health. And

along the way we get to enjoy healthy, energetic children and teenagers who voluntarily choose to eat more than just crisps and 2-minute noodles.

**HEALTHY FOOD
GIVES KIDS A HEAD
START IN LIFE**

Instinctively we know that the food we feed our children has a huge effect on their growth, behaviour and health. Otherwise why would we bother goading them to eat vegetables, resorting desperately to sayings such as "Eat your carrots, they make you see in the dark" (based on the fact that they contain beta-

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carotene, a type of vitamin A of which a deficiency causes night blindness) and "What about the starving children in Africa?" (based on no logic at all - finishing your dinner unfortunately doesn't help them). Why do we feel so guilty if they eat pasta and animal biscuits for dinner?

Here's some of the science that supports our instinct. Babies who are breast-fed have less risk of developing allergies. Toddlers who are deficient in iron can have impaired brain and intellectual development which is permanent and irreversible. Children who have a lower saturated fat intake in childhood have less insulin resistance – a key predictor for diabetes and heart disease. Babies who are underweight in their first two years of life and who then gain weight rapidly have a greater risk of insulin resistance and heart disease in adulthood. Around two out of every three obese children will become obese adults, especially children who are still obese after the age of ten.

HOW OUR FOOD HABITS ARE FORMED

The food we grow up with is often the food we prefer as adults. Think about the foods you like to eat; many of these will be foods

If you grew up in a family where you all sat around the television enjoying fish and chips while watching the rugby, chances are that as an adult you will not sit down to watch the rugby with a bowl of carrot sticks.

you ate as a child. My mother went through a health phase when we were kids – before nutrition was such a popular topic. She decided we didn't need salt but we did need wheatgerm (a great source of vitamins B and E). So we all had wheatgerm sprinkled on our salt-free porridge every morning. What started as taste-bud torture soon became normal, and we all still eat porridge that way!

Food routines can also carry over into adulthood. If you grew up in a family where you all sat around the television enjoying fish and chips while watching the rugby, chances are that as an adult you will not sit down to watch the rugby with a bowl of carrot sticks.

STAGES IN DEVELOPMENT


Our role as parents is to gradually introduce our children to as wide a range of foods and flavours as possible. Young children have a natural preference for sweet foods which throughout history has attracted them to energy-rich foods to help them grow, and kept them away from poisonous foods which tend to taste bitter. It's why they choose grapes over olives and carrots over broccoli.



Cindy Williams is a dietitian with over ten years experience as a Nutrition Consultant in Australia and New Zealand. She has consulted to food industry, sports teams and community organisations such as the National Heart Foundation. She has a Master of Public Health and a Graduate Diploma in Communication.

Trying new foods can be fun and certainly the second six months of life is a constant adventure in new flavours. By one year of age a child should be eating a basic version of the family's meals – meat, fish or chicken, vegetables, fruit, bread, cereals, rice, pasta, and dairy foods. In fact a one year old may eat as much or more than a five-year old. This is a stage when we can feel that we have got it together as far as feeding goes.

Then, around the two-year mark their growth rate slows and the 'four-Weet-bix-a-morning' baby turns into a 'bite-of-toast' toddler. Toddlers grow in spurts and their appetite reflects this with days of eating lots and days or weeks of eating very little. We worry about whether they are getting enough for their needs. But children are naturally designed to eat exactly the amount they need. They regulate the quantity; it's our job to choose the quality.

Children don't need to clear the plate. In this age of excess food we need children to maintain their natural ability to stop when feeling full. Forcing them to finish everything on the plate will eventually over-ride this important mechanism. 

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My son spent at least a year of his toddler-hood refusing all meat and chicken. As he had been the 'perfect eater' up until that time, I was in shock! I was fanatically aware of the importance of iron for his brain development, as only an over-caring, nutritionally trained mother can be, and had to use great amounts of self-control not to panic and force-feed him! I tried to feed him every other source of iron possible – iron-fortified cereal, peanut butter on wholemeal bread, hummus, spinach, eggs, dried apricots, figs, baked beans, all served with vitamin C-rich fruit to enhance absorption. Meanwhile I tried disguising meat in pasta sauce, mini-meatballs, meatloaf, tiny morsels hidden in fried rice, finely sliced fillet steak delicately arranged around the plate with other choice morsels. Most of my efforts were rejected. Each time I fell into frantic visions of my son's brain atrophying from lack of iron I reminded myself that this was a stage that would end. Not many 15 year-old boys refuse steak.

It is important to keep the long-term goal in mind: to get them through the toddler years without food hang-ups. These usually develop when over-concerned parents get into food fights with their toddler, start using bribery to get them to eat so-called 'good' food and unwittingly help their kids discover that the word "No" can cause mummy and daddy to act in very entertaining ways!



HELP! TIPS FOR WHEN A CHILD WON'T EAT

■ **ENSURE REGULAR MEAL AND SNACK TIMES.** Children respond best to a routine.

■ **SERVE CHILD-SIZED AMOUNTS.** Big serves of food are daunting to a little one.

■ **DON'T GIVE UP ON THE FIRST ATTEMPT.** Children can take eight to 10 tries before they decide they like a new flavour. A child may spit out beans at 18 months and be happily dipping them in tzatziki (yoghurt with finely chopped cucumber and mint) at two and a half. Offer only one new food at a time and serve it with familiar foods.

■ **TRY IT RAW.** Some kids hate cooked vegetables but will happily munch on raw carrot sticks, cauliflower pieces, snow peas and green beans while you prepare dinner. Who knows: they may eat their daily vegetable quota (about 1 cup) before they even get to the dinner table!

■ **USE SHAPES AND COLOURS.** Cut fruit, cheese, bread and vegetables into interesting shapes such as cubes, sticks, and circles. Arrange food on the plate to look like a house, flower or a face with grape eyes, grated cheese hair, carrot stick mouth and baby tomato nose.

■ **NAME IT.** My four-year-old recently enjoyed fish, vegetables and a pile of mashed potato because it was called "Tracy Island" from Thunderbirds.

■ **NO DISTRACTIONS.** Turn off the television. Have children stop their play and sit up at the table to eat. Meal-time is for eating, not playing.

■ **CHECK THAT CHILDREN HAVE NOT FILLED UP ON MILK, FRUIT JUICE OR SNACKS JUST BEFORE DINNER.** Milk is more like a food than a fluid – nutritious and filling. Keep it for set meal and snack times. Children who 'live' on milk can miss out on important nutrients because they are too full to eat other foods. Milk is a great source of calcium, energy and protein but has very little vitamin C, iron, folate and fibre. Fruit juice naturally has about three teaspoons of sugar in each glass. Serve it diluted with water and keep for occasionally.

■ **HAVE A TASTE-TESTING SESSION.** This worked amazingly for a fruit-phobic five-year-old. Together we shopped for a variety of fruit that he thought he did not like but was prepared to grade with a tick or a cross after trying. He sat down and very seriously tasted a tiny morsel of each one. He was completely free to give it a tick or a cross. His mother and I asked his opinion of each and made it a fun game. There was no pressure on him to eat any of the fruit as it was not a meal time. To his surprise, and ours, he ended up giving a tick to almost every fruit.

■ **LEAD BY EXAMPLE.** Actions speak louder than words. If our regular lunch is a meat pie and soft drink, we can't expect our kids to want sandwiches, fruit and water.

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HOLDING OUT FOR THE 'GOOD' STUFF – THE POWER OF NO!

Picture this: you've spent hours preparing child friendly mini-meatballs in a naturally colourful home-made tomato sauce. You've served it imaginatively on the plate surrounded by a few green peas, beautifully carved carrot sticks, an artistic sprinkle of cheese. You place it on the table before your darling toddler. Her face screws up in a look of disgust. "Yuk! I don't want it, I'm not hungry". There are so many options for a response here from "Look, I've spent hours making this" (don't expect sympathy from a three-year-old); "Well, what would you like?" (you're not a restaurant); "If you eat this, I'll give you ice-cream" (Bingo! This is how to get the sweet stuff!).

Toddlers soon learn if refusing a meal will get them what they really want. It really is a battle of control and we, the parents, need to win. Put the meal in the fridge and re-heat when your child gets hungry or at the next meal-time. If it means going to bed with no

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MINISTRY OF HEALTH GUIDELINES FOR CHILDREN

- Eat many different foods
- Eat enough for activity and growth
- Eat mini-meals or snacks
- Have plenty to drink
- Have treat foods now and then
- Take part in regular physical activity

dinner one night, try to suppress those feelings of sympathy and guilt, and think about the long term goal. No child ever faded away from missing a meal.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS: HOW TO ENCOURAGE HEALTHY HABITS

Get kids involved

Life is a great adventure for young children and food can be part of it. Let them pick herbs

or vegetables out of the garden, if you have one. Point out interesting fruit and vegetables in the supermarket and let them choose one to take home. Let them help you pat out the scones or measure out ingredients for baking. Be prepared for some mess and the odd spill. Fruit smoothie on your clothes and egg shells in the cake mix is worth it if the children grow up viewing food as fun.

Make-your-own takeaways

Home-made takeaways are healthier, cheaper and fun. Try these:

Fish and Chips:

Pan-fried fish with oven baked chips.

Burgers:

Make beef patties with lean mince

and grated vegetables. Place on a burger bun and children can choose from grated carrot, tomato, lettuce, cheese, beetroot, and tomato sauce to top off.

Pizza:

Make your favourite base or for toddlers use half a muffin as the base.

Burrito:

Spread a warmed tortilla with hummus, light sour cream or capsicum pesto. Roll up with your child's choice of thinly sliced cooked chicken, avocado, tomato, grated cheese, grated carrot and shredded lettuce.

Family Meals

Eating together as a family is important. Even if your busy schedule doesn't allow it every night, try to have at least one night a week where you all sit down together to enjoy a meal. It is here that children learn the social aspects of food: how to set the table, how to use cutlery, table manners, and how to chat over a meal rather than grunting a few syllables while mesmerised by the television. Your children will see how you eat and what you eat. This is a good chance to give children more control over what they eat: place the food on the table buffet-style

and let the children help themselves to whatever they wish. They may be tempted to try the hated courgette when they see everyone else enjoying it.

Eating Out

A few weeks ago I was sitting with friends at a restaurant and asked the waiter what they had for children, his slightly disdainful reply was, "Well, we don't do chips". Why is it that we assume adults can eat normal healthy food but children need chips when they go out? Choose interesting foods from the main menu and ask for child sizes if possible. At the restaurant in question



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we ended up ordering mozzarella salad – kids love the mild flavour – and shared a pasta dish. Other ideas are risotto, fried rice, noodles, eggs, breads and dips.

Building Strong Bones

Calcium is essential for young growing bodies and dairy foods (milk, yoghurt and cheese) are the best source of this bone-building nutrient. The Ministry of Health recommends that children under the age of five drink 500ml (about two cups) of milk each day. This should be full-fat milk up until the age of two.

If your child does not like to drink large glasses of milk, try these calcium-rich food ideas.

- Sprinkle cheese on food
- Spread a thin layer of vegemite on old bread, slice into fingers, sprinkle with cheese and bake until crisp for crunchy crackers
- Yoghurt
- Custard
- Milk puddings
- Rice pudding
- Smoothies and milkshakes
- Make porridge with milk instead of water
- Add milk to soups, mashed potato, mince
- For non-dairy calcium foods try sardines, nuts, eggs, wholegrains and legumes.

After age two, children can drink reduced-fat milk so long as they are eating a good variety of food. Fatty build-up in the arteries does start in childhood.

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SAMPLE MENU FOR A TODDLER

BREAKFAST

½ cup porridge, or 1 Weet-bix with milk
1 piece toast with butter and honey
Drink of dilute juice or a few slices of orange or kiwifruit

MORNING TEA

Small banana muffin or carrot and nut cake
Small glass of milk

LUNCH

Egg sandwich on wholemeal bread
½ apple
Drink of water

AFTERNOON TEA

Peanut butter on slice of bread or crackers
3 seedless grapes
Drink of water

DINNER

Lean mince with 2-3 vegetables sprinkled with cheese
½ cup rice or pasta
½ cup of milk pudding or ½ carton of yoghurt



DO TODDLERS NEED LOW FAT?

No. A toddler's body needs fat to grow and develop. It provides the fat-soluble vitamins A, D and E. It also provides essential fats that the body can't make including one called DHA which is essential for a baby's brain and retinal visual function.

After age two, children can drink reduced-fat milk so long as they are eating a good variety of

food. Fatty build-up in the arteries does start in childhood so if you are concerned about your child's fat intake, first concentrate on limiting fatty takeaways and fried foods, rather than reducing milk. And encourage healthy fats from fish, vegetable oils, nuts, peanut butter (choose no added salt or sugar), seeds, grainy bread and wholegrain cereals.

CAN MY CHILD HAVE TOO MUCH FIBRE?

Fibre helps keep children's bowels regular, prevents over-eating leading to obesity and keeps cholesterol and blood sugar levels normal. The best way to ensure enough fibre is to give your children a wide variety of

fruit, vegetable and wholegrains – not too much though, or they will be so full they won't be able to eat enough food for their rapid growth needs.

Toddlers need about two pieces of fruit and a cup of vegetables each day, as well as about four serves of breads and cereals. The sample menu on page 38 shows how to fit this into a child's eating pattern.

WATER

Water is the best fluid for both adults and children. Our body is 70% water and if we don't top it up each day we can feel tired, and suffer headaches, dry skin and constipation. There is no exact amount recommended for children but it's a good idea to get children into the habit of drinking water regularly. Teach children to drink even when not thirsty as by the time they feel thirsty they are well on the way to dehydration. A well hydrated child will have pale urine.

Encourage children with small, 



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frequent drinks of water. Keep cordial and fruit juice for occasional drinks and always serve diluted. Always take a water bottle when going out, order water when eating out and serve water with snacks and meals.

RECIPE FOR LITTLIES: Carrot and Nut Cake

This is an adaptation of a NZ Women's Weekly recipe. The oil and walnuts provide important unsaturated fat and omega-3 fats. Even toddlers will eat this cake, including the ginger! Give it a try!

- eggs 2
- oil ½ cup
- brown sugar 1 cup
- grated carrot 2 cups (more is OK)
- sultanas ½ cup
- crystallized ginger ½ cup chopped
- walnuts 1 cup, chopped
- self-raising flour 1 cup
- baking soda 1 teaspoon

START AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON!

My seventy year old father-in-law grew up in a raupo hut on the edge of Ohiwa Harbour. His grandmother weaned him on kumara and puha mashed together in her mouth. His staple diet as a child and teenager was fish, eels, herrings, kumara, puha, kanga-wai (fermented corn), pikopiko (fern fronds) and for special occasions eggs, pork and chicken. Sugar was a rare treat and there was no salt.

Although his adult diet has been typical New Zealand – he loves fish and chips as much as anyone and certainly indulged his fair share of beer as a young man – he has never been in hospital, takes no medication, had all his teeth until age 69 (despite minimal dentist visits) and is physically and mentally fit and energetic. In contrast, his brothers who were raised on a more usual diet for their era including sugar, cakes and fried, salty foods are either dead or physically ailing. He attributes his good health to his childhood diet more than good luck, good genes or good management.

- cinnamon ½ teaspoon
- mixed spice ½ teaspoon

Beat eggs, oil and sugar in a food processor. Add carrot, sultanas, ginger and walnuts. Blend for about 10 seconds. Add remaining dry ingredients. Blend for 30 seconds until well mixed. Pour into cake tin lined with baking paper. Bake at 170°C for 50-60 minutes.

SERVES 12



	per serve	% Day
Energy	1055kJ (252cals)	12%
Protein	4.2g	4%
Fat	14.6g	22%
- saturated	2.2g	10%
Carbohydrates	26.2g	9%
- sugars	18.9g	23%
Fibre	1.6g	5%
Sodium	100mg	6%
Calcium	40mg	4%
Iron	1.0mg	6%

*see page 42 for details

For sources of information for this article see page 95 or www.healthyfood.co.nz

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