

Nourishing the brains and bodies of your school-age superstars

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While there is so much today that is trumpeted as 'convenient and easy', many parents feel overwhelmed by the complexities and stresses of modern life. Time is always too short. Family life is often frenetic; overloaded with arduous work, school, and social schedules. In the midst of all this turbulence, we're striving to do the very best for our kids, including getting sufficient good food down their gullets every day.



Parents face a range of challenges when it comes to making sure their kids get the nutrition they need to support optimal physical and cognitive development. Many children are picky or fussy eaters. Load shedding is constantly disrupting food preparation and family mealtimes. Prioritising the time needed to commute through traffic to and from school and work, cuts into our family time, and we're eating far more meals on the go. The world is awash in fast foods, convenience meals and nutrient-poor treats and snacks that our kids can easily grow to prefer over healthy home-cooked fare. High prices are narrowing the choices of food we can afford.

Vanessa Clarke, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for ADSA (Association for Dietetics in South Africa) says: "With the rise of convenience food and easy access to takeaways through home deliveries and drive-thrus, it is becoming harder for parents to ensure children consume balanced meals. Unfortunately, convenience and fast-food meals are often short on servings of vegetables and fruit, low in fibre and protein while higher in saturated fat and salt. Children are also often powering through their school day on energy and sports drinks instead of prioritising nutrient dense meals made from whole foods."

While good nutrition is important at every age, school-going children are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of poor diet. Of course, healthy eating helps to grow strong bodies, muscles, bones and teeth, but it also affects brain development and cognitive performance, as well as mood. Balanced meals play a vital role in having a well-adjusted child who is better equipped to meet the demands of a busy school day.

Creating a family culture of healthy eating

As a parent of a school-going boy, Thembekile Dhlamini, another ADSA spokesperson and registered dietitian, is facing the same challenges as the parents she advises. She says, “I understand parents who are challenged by their children’s diet at home and at school because I am one of them. When my son started school, I would buy good sources of all nutrients to support his development, but he did not want any of the options that were given to him. His teacher noticed he was throwing away food from his packed lunch box. I had to shift my tactics.

“Now, I make sure that he eats home-cooked porridge or oats enriched with peanut butter before school, and I give him light lunchbox options such as fruit, yoghurt, nuts and water. After school, we sit together and eat a healthy home-cooked lunch with a variety of foods. As parents we must be role models for healthy eating and make a healthy lifestyle part of what we value as a family. We need to take our children’s preferences and habits into account, make sure they understand healthy eating and reinforce this at home to ensure that our children can perform well at school.”

Dietitians agree that involving children in meal preparation is a way to inspire healthy eating and can help make picky and fussy eaters more curious about trying a wider range of foods. Finding enjoyment and togetherness around making and sharing food as a family helps to build a culture of healthy eating and encourages learning about nutrition and the role of different nutrients in maintaining healthy bodies.

Essential nutrients for nourishing brains and bodies

Clarke says: “Supporting the energy demands of school going children is key. Just like adults, children require energy in three forms. They need protein to support the everyday functions of the cells in their bodies, high fibre carbohydrates for a steady supply of glucose for their brains and bodies and healthy fat which supports brain health as well as helps children’s bodies absorb crucial vitamins such as vitamin A, D, E and K. Along with meeting children’s energy needs, adequate calcium and vitamin D intake is essential at school-going age, as 50% of a person’s bone mass is acquired between the ages of 9 and 18 years.”



Some kid-friendly affordable nutrient-rich food options include:

- Yoghurt, cheese and milk provide both protein as well as Calcium and essential Vitamins
- A peanut butter sandwich on whole wheat bread provides carbohydrates and healthy fats
- A whole wheat sandwich with a filling of omega-3 rich fish such as pilchards or mackerel provides carbohydrates,

protein and healthy fats for brain function

- Carrot and cucumber sticks with a hummus dip provides a high-fibre, vitamin-rich serving of fresh veg as well as protein from the chickpeas
- Eggs are a versatile food that can be included in lunchboxes and meals in many ways. In addition to protein, eggs provide iodine which plays a role in brain development and thyroid function
- Beans in a whole wheat wrap or roll is a great way to provide both carbohydrate and protein at the same time to school-going children
- A banana before or after extra-curricular activities can help to boost energy
- Water should always be the first choice to meet the fluids demands of a child. Add fruit such as strawberries, lemon or orange slices for extra flavour
- For balance, always include fresh vegetables and fruits in lunch boxes. Add nuts, such as walnuts, if you can

In a time of shrinking household budgets, rising food costs and a power crisis, many families are shifting to preparing extra food at dinner time so that they have leftovers of a balanced, home-cooked meal for lunchboxes the next day. “A bit of planning, shopping and cooking in bulk can help you to save on food costs and reduce your energy use,” Dhlamini concludes. “It also increases your family’s access to home-cooked meals and limits spending on nutrient-poor convenience or take-away foods. We all want to give our children the best start in life, and it is worth getting creative and smart when it comes to providing our kids with the balanced meals they need to thrive.”

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