

Eat to boost school performance

For years, athletes have eaten to win. Is it possible for kids to eat to learn?

Leigh-Ann Silber, registered dietician, provides the scoop on how to feed kids so they end the school year on a healthy and happy note.

What your children eat could determine how well they do in school, how well they pay attention, learn, and even the marks they get. Wow, that is huge pressure for us parents. But saying so, it is our responsibility to ensure that they are given the best foods for their brain and body to function optimally.

Proper nutrition is critical for developing minds and bodies as well as for maintaining optimal health in active young people.

However, based on a the latest research results of the SA National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2013, recently released by the Human Sciences and Medical Research Council, it showed us that South African kids may be heading for nutritional disaster.

As a nation we are heavier and less healthy than we think we are. What's worse, is that 22% of South African children, as compared to just 12% of children in the USA, long considered the heaviest people on the planet, suggests that our children are even bigger than those from where the source of most of the junk food consumed, come.

A separate study by Nestle into what South African children at private schools are eating while at school draws the same conclusions as the Research Councils'. The majority of children are consuming fizzy drinks and high-sugar, high-starch food which is also typically high in fat and sodium. None of which is surprising when you consider the addictive nature of these ingredients and the vast marketing spend to support their desirability.

We can't take these diet habits for granted, since how well our kids eat determines their mental and physical health both today and down the road, and their school performance, as well. In fact, numerous studies show that healthy diets based on real, not processed/fast foods, are associated with improved brain development and cognition, improved school performance, and better behavior patterns compared to children that eat a diet of low nutritional value.

5 ways to rev up your child's brain for learning

1. Breakfast

After fasting all night long, the brain needs fuel for the new day. Brains on breakfast are 20% more active than those without. Breakfast is literally breaking the fast from sleep. Without it, the brain is focused on survival and getting more energy – not thinking. In fact, studies have shown that without breakfast, children have:

- Slower memory recall
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty understanding new information
- Poor test performance
- Headaches
- Higher likelihood of weight gain or obesity

If your child is a breakfast avoider, they need to start eating breakfast, even if they aren't hungry. It may be difficult to begin with, but once they start, it will become a habit. It can take two to three weeks to reset the appetite clock, after that you should notice a gain in energy and mental power, especially if the meal is light and healthful.

What to choose for breakfast:

Try follow this rule for breakfast –

1. 1-2 whole-grains, a
2. A protein and
3. At least 1 serving of a colourful fruit or vegetable.

2. Don't eliminate the good fats

Think about the fat in your child's diet. While the saturated fats in meat, processed foods, and fatty dairy foods like butter and cheese, are bad for the heart and arteries and may undermine thinking, the right fats improve cognition. Your child's brain is fat, but in a good way- more than 60% of the brain is made of fat. (This is one organ we want to be fat). Unlike the lazy fat stored on the hips or stomach, fat in the brain is required for proper thinking. It makes up the cell membranes that surround each cell and the insulation sheath around neurons that allows thoughts to travel fast from one cell to another. The more fluid and flexible those membranes, the faster your child reacts, the more he/she remembers, and the more creative and clever that child is.

That's why the brain loves omega-3 fats. These are the most fluid of all fats. Your child's body can't make them, so is entirely dependent on choosing the grilled salmon not the cheeseburger for lunch.

Did you know taking DHA omega-3 may help kids' reading scores?

A new study from the University of Oxford shows there may be a link between low DHA blood levels and poorer reading ability, working memory and emotional behavior. The study tested 493 children aged 7 to 9 years old who had lower literacy rates than their peers. The students who had higher blood levels of DHA had improved behavior, reading skills and working memory compared to the children with low levels of DHA.

Include oily fish (such as salmon, mackerel, tuna, sardines) twice a week as well as adding seeds to your child's diet. This is not easy, especially when you have a picky eater, so I also encourage parents to give their kids a daily omega-3 supplement.

3. Vegetables

Next, let's talk veggies. YIP, sorry folks, but there is no getting away from eating veggies! While most kids avoid vegetables like the plague, there isn't anything more important in the diet than getting enough of the colorful ones. The brain consumes more oxygen than any other body tissue, which exposes it to a huge daily dose of oxygen fragments called free radicals. Free radicals destroy cells, including brain cells.

Fortunately, the body has an anti-free radical army comprised of the antioxidant nutrients, including vitamins C and E and beta carotene that deactivate these harmful oxygen fragments. Colorful vegetables and produce is the very best source of these antioxidants, with not only vitamin C, but also more than 12,000 phytochemicals, most of which are antioxidants. The research overwhelmingly shows that the more color-rich produce your child eats, the better he/she thinks.

If you not happy with the amount of vegetables your kids eat, here are some small changes that you as a parent can do to get your child headed in the right direction:

YOU CAN:

- Eat vegetables! You are the best role model for your child
- Help your child portion out vegetable servings after going grocery shopping for easy snack packs
- Wash and chop vegetables so they are always convenient to grab and eat
- Encourage your child to pack a vegetable with lunch or snack each day
- Encourage your child to experiment with different kinds of vegetables
- Identify dips or sauces that your child can eat with the vegetables to increase consumption.

At Tufts University in Boston, animals fed diets enriched with extra produce, such as blueberries and spinach, performed best on memory tests throughout life. The same holds true for kids. Kids (and adults) who eat the most broccoli, sweet potatoes, spinach, and other deep-colored produce, maintain the highest blood levels of antioxidants. They also score highest on memory tests, exhibit the best judgment and reasoning, maintain a youthful ability to learn new tasks, and react quickly.

4. Leveraging lunch

What kids eat at lunch is critical to how well they maintain their energy through the afternoon. Lunch should provide a third of your child's energy, vitamins, and minerals.

Unfortunately kids are not going to come running when you offer them a lunch box filled with brain food. In fact, most are going to turn the other way and run as fast as they can! But, parents can sneak brain healthy foods into their kid's lunch (without too big of a fuss from either parent or child), and aid in boosting a child's brainpower and learning abilities.

Pack these powerhouse brain foods:

- **Sandwiches on whole-wheat or low GI bread** - Boosting brainpower is as simple as switching over to whole grain or low GI bread or rolls. To prevent boredom try other whole-grain foods such as whole-wheat tortillas or pitas/ for making sandwiches or wraps. Using whole-grain pasta for lunch-box pasta salads also adds the extra nutrients needed for positive long-lasting energy. Whole grain food items are high in folate and other B vitamins that help improve memory function and are also full of fiber, keeping your child's tummy full
- **A protein** such as tuna/egg/turkey/chicken/cold home-cooked meats/fish/cheese
- **Throw in some other brain boosting foods** –nuts, seeds, avocado, vegetables
- **Add a fruit for sweetness and added vitamins and minerals.**

5. Hydration

Of course, there's more to thinking clearly than just diet. Water is an overlooked factor in children's health. The first symptom of dehydration is fatigue, including mental fatigue. Thirst is not always the best indicator of a child's fluid needs, so make sure to tuck an extra water bottle into their lunch bag and encourage them to drink water, not soft drinks, throughout the day

And never forget that that daily exercise, getting enough sleep, leaving time in the day to dream, and a supportive, stress-free home is critical to your child's school performance and health in general. But most certainly the role of nutrition in mental performance cannot be denied.

Future articles will expand on these issues and give tips and suggestion to help you implement them.

Leigh-ann silber RD (SA) helps encourage parents to nourish their kids' bodies and brains.

Leigh-Ann Silber is registered dietician with a passion for helping parents encourage their kids to eat healthier. After 16 years in the nutrition industry, she has recently opened up a practice in Morningside Sandton focusing on:

- Basic Healthy eating for infants, children and adolescent (assisting parents with meals and feeding),

- Fussy and picky eating
- Autism
- Attention Deficit Disorder
- Sensory issues with eating

She works closely with your child's occupational therapist or education psychologist to ensure that that you are provided with a multidisciplinary approach.

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