

Not easy feeding kids nowadays

Parents juggle picky eaters, nutrition and food costs

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PETALING JAYA: From lunchboxes that come back barely touched, to children who pick out every piece of taueh in their ramen, parents say feeding kids a balanced diet can feel like a daily negotiation.

For many, the biggest challenge in feeding children well is getting fussy eaters to accept balanced meals without wasting food or blowing the budget.

Several parents who spoke to *The Star* described different household realities but shared the same goal: ensuring their children get the nutrients they need while keeping meals practical and affordable.

The concern comes as Unicef has flagged a “triple burden of malnutrition” among Malaysian children.

In its Malaysia Annual Report 2024, Unicef cited stunting at 21.2% and anaemia at 46.5% among children under five, alongside overweight and obesity con-

cerns among adolescents.

Meanwhile, the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2022: Maternal and Child Health reported wasting at 11.0% among children below five.

Janis Ng, 43, from Melaka, said her eldest son, 12, is a “meat and egg” eater.

“Not a single vege. Even when they are already in the dish, my son can single out every bit of taueh in the ramen bowl,” she said in an interview.

Weekday dinners are usually home-cooked with help from the children’s grandmother, but weekends tend to be meals out at places with familiar “safe” options such as teriyaki chicken or chicken rice.

“The school’s nutrition meals help. At least my son can eat ‘some’ vege,” she said.

Nur Liza Abdullah, 42, from Ampang, whose daughter has just entered Year One, said she made sure her child eats at least a small portion, even if meals are simple.

She said dinner may sometimes

be as basic as fried fish with rice and soy sauce.

She also tries to work vegetables into the week.

“One week two times ABC soup. Luckily, she still likes it,” she said, adding that packed lunches can come back barely touched sometimes when her daughter only eats what she likes.

A mother of three, Christine Lee, from Damansara, said she would stick closely to balanced meals and food quality.

“I am very concerned with my kids’ food intake – they must be a balanced meal of vege, protein and carbs.

“I get up at 5.30am to prepare freshly cooked breakfast for them before school,” she said.

When they buy lunch at the canteen, Lee said she teaches them how to choose more suitable options, especially on minimising processed food and added sugar.

Raj, 46, a single father and IT

programmer in Klang, said preparing breakfast for his 11-year-old daughter is a daily routine he takes seriously.

“I’m lucky my working hours are flexible. I usually make fried noodles with eggs and vegetables.

“Sometimes I prepare chapati dough and potato stew the night before, then just pan-fry the chapati in the morning,” he said.

Assoc Prof Dr Chin Yit Siew of Universiti Putra Malaysia’s Nutrition Department said picky eating is best managed through habits and a supportive food environment, not pressure.

“Children eat better when they feel empowered, not controlled,” she said, citing her work with urban-poor families and schools.

She advised parents to keep offering balanced, familiar food, model healthy eating and eat together, while involving children in choices and simple food prep.

“Keep portions small, especially for new food, and repeat exposure. Don’t force, pressure or bribe children to eat. Don’t cook separate meals to please picky eating and don’t give up after a few refusals,” she said.

Chin, who is also honorary secretary of the Malaysia Nutrition Society, said families do not need “perfect” meals but consistent exposure to balanced choices.

She encouraged parents to use the Malaysian Healthy Plate concept, *suku-suku-separuh*: a quarter plate of carbohydrates (rice, noodles, bread or chapati), a quarter plate of protein (eggs, fish, chicken, tofu or tempeh), and half a plate of vegetables and fruit.

To keep costs low and maintain a nutrient-dense diet, she suggested staples such as eggs, tofu or tempeh, canned sardines or mackerel, leafy vegetables like kangkung, sawi and bayam, and milk or fortified soy milk.



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