

Get children to be more involved in cooking as they are more likely to eat food they helped prepare.



Food for thought

Having the right food and eating habits are essential for brain development, writes

Sushma Veera

READING to children and playing with them — both indoors and outdoors — are among the activities that can help encourage the child's brain development.

Feeding them the right food is also important. Associate Professor Dr Loh Su Peng from Universiti Putra Malaysia's Department Of Nutrition & Dietetics (Faculty Of Medicine And Health Sciences) says brain food is food that is considered to be beneficial to the brain, especially in aiding intelligence, memory and creativity.

This includes snacks. "For the brain to stay sharp we need a constant supply of energy and the use of glucose as energy by the brain is greater in children than in adults," says Loh.

"The energy storage in the brain is limited to 10-15 minutes, suggesting that children may be particularly responsive to the nature and type of carbohydrate in their meals and the frequency of eating," she adds.

CONTINUOUS ACTIVITY

Loh says that uninterrupted activity of the brain is vital to ensure the continuous performance of essential voluntary functions such as learning and involuntary functions such as breathing.

"It is, therefore, imperative that the brain is protected from even short-term disruptions of its efficient working conditions. One crucial factor is the supply of metabolic fuel to the brain, in the form of glucose.

"There is no doubt that children's brains function better with a constant and balanced supply of energy provided by complex carbohydrates," says Loh.

How can we encourage our children to make good choices when it comes to food?

"Encourage normal and good eating habits. As parents, we can make sure that our children's diet is as nutritious and wholesome as possible, even while allowing

for some of their favourite treats. The childhood impulse to imitate is strong, so it's important we act as role models for our children," says Loh.

SOME TIPS

Here are many ways to encourage your toddler to enjoy a healthy meal:

- **Have regular family meals.** Knowing dinner is served at approximately the same time every night and that the entire family will be sitting down together is comforting and enhances appetite.

- **Breakfast is another great time for a family meal.** Upon waking up, brain energy may not be at its optimum level due to the overnight fast. The brain needs a con-

stant and even supply of energy from food. Breakfast that includes complex carbohydrates can provide children with a more balanced brain energy supply to kick start their learning at school.

This is supported by research which shows that children who eat a complex carbohydrate breakfast

tend to do better in school.

• Cook at home.

Eating home-cooked meals is healthier for the whole family and sets a great example for children about the importance of food. Save dining out for special occasions.

• Get children involved.

They enjoy helping adults to shop for groceries, selecting what goes in their daily meals. It's also a chance to teach them about the nutritional value of different foods, and (for older children) to read nutrition information panel.

- **Make a variety of complex carbohydrate healthy snacks.** Have fruit, vegetables, whole grain snacks and healthy beverages (water, milk, pure fruit juice) easily accessible so children will have a ready supply of healthy snacks instead of empty calorie snacks such as soda, chips, or cookies.

- **Limit portion sizes.** Don't insist your child clean the plate, and never use food as a reward or bribe.

sushma@nst.com.my



"The childhood impulse to imitate is strong, so it's important we act as role models for our children."

Dr Loh Su Peng



FATTY ACIDS

Essential fatty acids (alpha linolenic, EPA and DHA) from fats are used to create specialised cells that allow us to think and feel.

Food: Nuts and seed.



Feed the brain

TOP PICKS

Eating the right food can help a child's learning ability. **Sushma Veera** finds out more

IT is important to give your children the right nutrients to keep them alert and focused at school. Associate professor Dr Loh Su Peng from Universiti Putra Malaysia's Department Of Nutrition & Dietetics (Faculty Of Medicine And Health Sciences) says a child's learning ability and behaviour depends on what nutrients the brain can use as fuel.

For brain to stay mentally sharp, children need a constant supply of energy. Here are some effective foods that can give brain power a boost. ➔ sushma@nst.com.my



WATER

Proper hydration is critical for concentration and alertness.

stant supply of energy. Here are some effective foods that can give brain power a boost. sushma@nst.com.my



PROTEIN

Amino acids from proteins are used to make neurotransmitters that allow brain cells to network and communicate. Neurotransmitters are brain chemicals that motivate or sedate, focus or frustrate.

Food: Milk, beans and legumes, fish and seafood, eggs, protein.



FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

Micronutrients from food (especially vegetables and fruit) are the antioxidants the brain relies on to safeguard its cells from damage and dysfunction. These protect the brain from normal wear and tear.

Food: Fruit and dark green vegetables.



CARBOHYDRATE

Glucose from carbohydrate is the main fuel the brain uses to produce energy for its function. Sweets and candy do not make the grade because they are simple carbohydrates which, when broken down by the body into glucose, is absorbed very quickly, causing high peaks and sudden drops in glucose levels.

The fibre in complex carbohydrate, on the other hand, slows the body's absorption of energy, ensuring that the brain gets a slow and steady supply of fuel.

Food: Whole grains (brown rice, oats, breads, pasta, crackers, cereals).