

Food

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Children, Eating, Sleeping...a triad so emotive as to strike fear into so many parents' hearts! I'd like to deal with Sleep another time, but, why do we take it so personally when our children refuse to eat, and how can our attitudes affect their health in the long run?

We've all heard it said to us; "Children will never starve themselves!" but I remember feeling pure despair and not a small amount of fury as the plate went on the floor yet again with my first born. I think it is because feeding one's child is a primeval need within us, and it feels like personal rejection when a child refuses the breast, pushes away the bottle or sits mutinously in front of their full plate.

We worry about how much they eat. The rolls of chub on our babies' thighs don't stop us worrying if they feed poorly, however briefly. Some toddlers seem to literally live on air as they gain weight, charge round the room and continue to develop beautifully, much to their parents' disbelief. But we don't always worry what they eat...Does it matter? If the kids look good and play well, can't we leave the healthy stuff till later and just concentrate on getting something, anything into them?

The trouble is, it does matter what we choose. Not only are many chemical body processes, such as the way our bodies use sugar, fixed in early life, our children's taste buds are primed to prefer what they are introduced to early on, and changing their eating habits becomes harder and harder as time goes on, as we've all found.

So how have the marketeers solved this problem for us, and have they done a good job? There's a whole range of special convenience foods just for kids and the choice is overwhelming. I don't understand it - I guess I've never quite understood why my young children should eat food so very different from my own. But how they differ! Brightly coloured, fantastically shaped, cutely sized, often in dinky little throwaway mini-lunch boxes - kids just love them! "But just what is in them?" The Observer asked a number of months ago, in a 'naming and

shaming' article on the rubbish inside the food we unwittingly feed our kids.

It wasn't a surprise to see that most of these 'shameful' foods were dubious 'dippers', food in 'shapes', 'cheese' in incomprehensible forms, and 'real fruit drinks' in unnaturally fluorescent colours. As well as too much salt and sugar, the article revealed the myriad chemicals that make these things taste so good to young, uneducated palates. Not all contain nasty chemicals but some still have almost zero nutritional value - fine if an occasional treat, but they are marketed to replace the real thing. Like fruit winders - don't be taken in by the "10% real fruit!" - the rest is sticky sugar which glues like cement to young teeth, and the '10% real fruit' is best eaten straight from the fruit bowl. Some parents can be tremendously wary of letting their kids play out in the cul-de-sac alone (see previous editorial!), but then feed them poor quality food which is far more likely to end up as a health issue. This is why so many children can find it hard to make the leap from 'kids food' to eating a varied range of 'adult' foods.

And how else can the food we give our children affect them? Educational achievement and behaviour are intimately linked with a good day's grub, and good school meals are at the heart of it all. But what can we parents do that mucks it all up?

Let's talk about blood sugar. There are a lot of myths about blood sugar, but it governs our mood and the mood of our children enormously. I often hear the same story - child in absolutely foul mood when picked up from school, is then fed sweets or biscuits and cheers up to everyone's relief. We as adults do the same - feel tired or low? The temptation to reach for chocolate or a handful of custard creams is irresistible. And boy does it work!....briefly.

And this is why.... There are slow release sugars and fast release sugars. Slow-release sugars steadily increase the blood sugar to a sensible high and basically keep it there for many hours, with a gradual decrease. That makes for a calmer child who concentrates well, and who is hungry for his next meal at the right time.

On the other hand, fast release sugars are a quick fix but not a very good one. They make the blood sugar zoom up to a far greater high than is sensible...then it comes crashing down only a few hours later with all the associated symptoms that you see in your children at picking up time – crabby, aggressive, tearful.

This happens to many children because of the pattern of their meals and their snacks. Some children eat poorly at breakfast. To compensate, they are given cookies, Kit-Kats etc (all fast-release sugars) for break. These make the blood sugar go up so high that appetites are suppressed and poor at lunch time – so they eat poorly. Little in the way of slow-release sugars (more complex carbohydrates such as pasta, oats found in flapjacks and cereals, rice, potatoes, decent bread) are eaten so their blood sugars are at rock bottom at pick up time, and so they appear 'starving', crotchety etc. Giving even more fast release sugars at pick up time continues the cycle, and so it goes on.

Katie aged 9 said, "If you want a toy in a cereal box and it looks really big, it always turns out to be small and crummy." Appearances are deceiving – read the small print and feed your children's brains, not their buns!