

The best start in life

Though ensuring a toddler eats well can be very challenging there are a number of strategies that can help make parents' lives a little easier

Louise Reynolds



Feeding toddlers can be a challenge

for even the most well intentioned parent. Nutrition myths and misinformation abound and, combined with a strong willed two-year old, can be enough to make mealtimes stressful for everyone around the dinner table.

Public health nurses will meet with parents at various stages throughout the first three years of a child's life and are in a unique position to advise on feeding concerns. In a healthy child with no underlying medical problems, some practical tips and pointers combined with reassurance can help a concerned parent to overcome many of the normal toddler food issues.

Essential foundation

Nutrition in the first three years of life has a lasting influence on how the brain and body are 'hardwired'... setting the metabolic clock, influencing the risk of heart disease or obesity, and having a

powerful impact on later food choices and preferences.¹ For instance:

- High protein intakes in early life can increase the risk of obesity
- Higher sodium intakes in early life can lead to higher blood pressure later on in childhood
- Early iron deficiency can have a lasting impact on brain development
- Greater exposure and a greater variety of tastes in early life can actually 'programme' babies to accept new foods more readily.

For these reasons, and the current concern for the poor eating habits exhibited by many Irish adults, it makes sense to start instilling healthy eating habits in childhood.

Common concerns

A recent survey of 700 Irish mothers' attitudes to feeding their infants and toddlers was published on behalf of Cow&Gate Nutrition.² More than two-

thirds of the mothers surveyed expressed concern about one or more aspects of their child's diet and the recurrent issues included:

- High intake of processed meats and convenience foods
- Over-reliance on cow's milk
- Low intake of fruit and vegetables
- Poor variety of foods eaten (the same few favourite foods being eaten everyday).

These issues will have a negative effect on a child's nutritional status as follows:

- High intakes of salt and fat
- Low iron intake and poor appetite
- Low intakes of vitamins and minerals
- Limiting the range of foods eaten is more likely to result in vitamin and mineral deficiencies

Practical suggestions

Processed vs fresh foods

Parents should cook lean meat, chicken breasts, fish fillets and minced meat more

Tips for ensuring adequate fruit and vegetable intake

- Fruit and vegetables should be included in every meal
- For a vegetable that has been refused in the past, suggest preparing it in a different way. Don't just boil vegetables, toddlers can show more interest in the flavour of vegetables when stir-fried, roasted or baked
- Pack casseroles and home-made meat based dishes with loads of mixed vegetables
- Fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruit and vegetables can be used in recipes
- Until a toddler learns to enjoy eating vegetables, grating vegetables into dishes at least ensures that they get some of the nutritional benefits
- For a fruit that has been refused in the past, also suggest preparing it in a different way
- Parents should offer a choice of fruit, 'do you want the banana or some melon', rather than just telling the toddler they have to eat the melon. Toddlers often enjoy having more control over what they eat
- Freezing fruit purees as ice-pops is a good way of adding a fruit portion, helping them get closer to achieving their daily requirement on hot days
- Smoothies can be packed with fruity goodness and toddlers love them. Suggest that parents make quick and easy nutrient-rich smoothies by blending yoghurt and fruit, trying different combinations for a variety of tastes
- Snacks provide an important part of the energy toddlers need and an ideal opportunity to include fruit and vegetables
- Pure unsweetened fruit juice is a great source of vitamin C, but due to the high natural sugar content make sure to dilute the juice one part fruit juice to four or five parts water and give with main meals to prevent tooth decay

often than their processed counter parts – frozen burgers, sausages, fish fingers, chicken nuggets and ready made frozen meals.

The processed options listed here tend to be much higher in salt and fat and much lower in protein, vitamins and minerals. Unfortunately, they also tend to be a big hit with young children. By cooking the fresh meats, children will lean to appreciate the real taste of foods without the extra salt, fat and additives.

If children are constantly eating processed foods it can be very difficult to get them to eat freshly cooked, plainer meals.³ Keep the processed foods to a minimum as a treat rather than everyday.

Healthy, simple meals for toddlers include:

- Beef stew with mashed potato
- Minced meat with peas and potato
- Mild chicken curry and rice
- Shepherd's pie
- Baked fish in white sauce with mashed potato
- Home-made spaghetti bolognese
- Pasta and tuna bake with cheese sauce
- Potato and fish cakes.

If time is short the following quick, tasty meals are very nutritious:

- Scrambled eggs on toast
- French toast
- Omelette with cheese
- Beans on toast
- Microwave potato with cheese/beans on top
- Toasted sandwich.

Over-reliance on cow's milk

Toddlers should drink a pint of cow's

milk per day to meet daily calcium needs – amounts in excess of this can fill a child's stomach, leading to poor appetite at mealtimes.⁵ As cow's milk is low in iron, a toddler who is drinking large amounts of milk and eating a limited diet is at risk of iron deficiency.

Because of their rapid growth, toddlers have a high requirement for iron and if this is not met, they may become tired, listless and irritable. Unchecked iron deficiency may lead to anaemia and this can have long-term effects on both cognitive and motor development.

Practical suggestions for parents

- Discourage the use of a bottle over the age of one year
- Cow's milk should not be included as the main drink in the diet before the age of one – breast milk or infant formula should be used
- Cow's milk should be drunk at mealtimes, with water between meals to quench thirst. Avoid too much juice which can be high in sugar.

Low intake of fruit and vegetables

Reassure parents that they are certainly not alone if they have concerns about the fruit and vegetable intake of their toddler. The recent Irish toddler survey found that only one in eight toddlers met the daily recommended fruit and vegetable intake (four portions per day).

Fruit and vegetables contain a similar vitamin profile, so if the child is a poor vegetable eater, the deficit can be made up with fruit and vice versa. The Table above shows some practical suggestions for ensuring adequate fruit and vegetable

intake in a toddler's diet.

Encourage a wide and varied diet

The more foods that are included in the diet, the less chance there is of a toddler running short of any important vitamins or minerals. Toddlers see parents, siblings and other children as role models; if they see others eating fruit and vegetables, they are more likely to want to try them. Don't expect a toddler to eat lots of different fruit and vegetables if the rest of the family don't.

Remember food may have to be offered more than 10 times before a toddler decides that they like it! Toddlers' tastes change overtime, so a first refusal does not mean giving up. Try to eat a rainbow! The more highly coloured fruits and vegetables in the diet, the more likely it is that all nutritional needs will be met.

Louise Reynolds is a freelance dietitian working in Dublin

Note: The book 'Feed your child well' cited in this article is an excellent resource on the topic of nutrition for 0-5 year olds. It is available by sending a cheque for €17.99 made out to the authors (Therese Dunne, Phyllis Farrell, and Valerie Kelly) to the Dietetic Department of Temple Street Children's Hospital. The book is written by three paediatric dietitians and is accurate and up to date. It would be an excellent addition to every health centre.

References

1. Gibney MJ. Professor of Food and Nutrition, UCD – personal communication.
2. Irish Infant and Toddler Dietary Survey, April 2008. Cow and Gate,
3. Dunne T, Farrell P, Kelly V. Feed your child well – A handbook for parents in Ireland. The Children's University Hospital, Temple Street, Dublin 1.
4. Healthy eating for children. Factsheet – Paediatric Interest group of the INDI. www.indi.ie
5. Food for young children. Leaflet. HSE, Dec 2006. www.healthpromotion.ie