The Nutrition Connection

Mothers tend to think of nutrition as something related to their waistline rather than their children’s academic achievement. Think again.

Let’s start with human breast milk. To quote La Leche League International, a world-wide support group for breastfeeding, human babies need human milk and calves need cow’s milk. Little humans have a brain that will grow tremendously during the first year of life not only structurally as in myelinating its axons, but also in forming more and more synapses. Not so little cows. Little cows will stand up and walk within a day, but little humans will take 10-12 months to walk, on average. Do they really need the same nutrients? No wonder human milk is higher in the right kind of fats needed to develop the brain and nervous system while cow’s milk is higher in calcium, the bone builder.

So, you breast fed your baby for about two years, and gave him the right start. His brain grew healthily and is ready for formal instruction. You send him now to preschool. What should he eat? Many mothers figure that little humans are a fraction of a big full-size human and simply eat a fraction of what we do. Actually, not really. The type of nutrients they need is also different. They are growing not only in brain size (think more fats), but also in body size (think bones, muscles, etc). They are also much more active than we are. Anyone ever tried to duplicate the movements of a toddler for an hour straight? We should not feed them a quarter of a figure-conscious mother’s diet. High carbs are OK for this age group. But do not forget the vitamins, minerals and proteins.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have the mother who thinks a toddler eats the same quantity and quality of food as an adult. Force feeding is done either by imprisoning the child in a high chair or other immobilizing device (stroller, baby carrier, door frame jumper, etc) or by running with a spoon after the dear little one for an hour or two. The only achievement of this process is to produce a child who will not enjoy food for a long time to come. They either turn into thin reeds (the child wins the battle) or into overweight disease-prone miseries (the adult wins the battle). The child loses his innate ability to gauge the amount and type of food his body needs.

As a child moves into grade school and needs his brain to stay alert during class, a different problem emerges. The typical American breakfast is high in carbohydrates. Examples are pancakes, waffles, jelly sandwiches, and so on. Carbs are good in moderation. If your child at this age is not fiddling and running and jumping non-stop any more, then maybe he needs less empty calories than a couple of years ago. When a person receives a sudden input of a lot of simple carbohydrates (sugars, generally), his blood sugar shoots up way above normal, but as long as he has a healthy pancreas, the insulin produced will bring that down just as quickly, often producing a sudden dip in the blood sugar level below normal half an hour to an hour after intake. Low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) causes loss of concentration, slight confusion, irritability and sleepiness. This is not what you want your child to be like during the first hour or two of class. Schools tend to put Math or Reading, whatever they assume needs full concentration, in the first part of the morning. If you have ever felt sleepy and confused after a heavy meal, you know what I’m talking about. Do you wonder then why the first hour teacher thinks your child is slow in learning?

A better breakfast should be high in protein. These take longer to break down and therefore raise the blood sugar gently and over a longer period of time. There is therefore no rebound “crash” as the blood sugar level eventually slowly decreases back to a normal fasting level.

The same applies to subsequent “snacks” and to school lunch. On the days your child has P.E., however, pack more carbs, and send lots of fluids, in particular those well-balanced in electrolytes such as Gatorade and Powerade.

Finally, do pay attention to prevention of infectious diseases such as colds and flus. These are a given in any large crowded place like schools. Within a month of the start of school, there will be a cold or flu doing the rounds. It will be back after every major break, like clockwork. How can you protect your child, or at least minimize the severity and length of the illness if he has to catch it? The simplest way, other than washing hands and disposing properly of soiled tissues, is to take vitamin C regularly. Vitamin C is pretty much the one-shot-cure-all preventive panacea. A friend of mine whose children were out with upper respiratory infections at least twice a month, was able to cut that down to just once a year by simply giving them a glass of fresh orange or lemon juice every morning. Failing that, a tablet of at least 500 mg vitamin C every morning will do the trick just as well.

Take heart! Children’s nutrition is not hard to navigate. If you have allowed them to retain their instinctual appetite, they will guide you to what their bodies need!

“You are what you eat.” We have heard this often enough in every language. How true is it?