

Food Additives and Children's Behaviour



by Julie O'Connell Seamer

As a Mum, I admit that it's challenging when walking down the supermarket aisles to not give in to pleas by my youngest for "fun" looking processed foods. I remind myself that food choices for him not only affect health but his behaviour too.

Food fundamentally changes the chemicals in our brain, which in turn affect mood and consequent actions. Since food processing has become more mechanistic and technology-based, it is interesting that mental and behavioural problems such as ADD, ADHD and depression amongst children and adolescents have become more common place.

All brain chemicals need the precursors of certain amino acids. Depending on what the dominant food type is during a meal will decide which neurotransmitters are activated. Our mood is dependant on these neurotransmitters which facilitate communication between the brain and nervous system.

Poor dietary choices affect neurotransmitters. Carbohydrates, for instance, increase the levels of the brain hormone serotonin. Refined carbohydrates like white sugar and highly processed breakfast cereals do provide a quick boost of serotonin making us feel good. However this serotonin spikes confuses the brain making it shut down some of the receptors in an attempt to restore balance. The result is serotonin resistance - something similar to insulin resistance. This condition can lead to depression.

If you have ever seen how a child addicted to white break and sugar reacts after being denied the chemicals in these foods, it's not a happy scene!

The protein content in nuts, meat, chicken, fish, eggs, legumes, yoghurt and seeds increase two neurotransmitters in the brain called dopamine and noradrenalin. These chemicals cause a state of alertness and are important for sustained energy. Likewise, the fats we consumer and give to our children are crucial for health.

Good fats work favourably and actually are part of the make up of the neurones in the brain. Cell membranes (the outer part of the cell) are made up of fats, as are the receptors that help with the balance and travel of neurotransmitters in and out of cells and neurones. Quality fats such as omega 3 and 6 oils feed the brain. Eating fish oil can help with childhood conditions such as poor behaviour, poor concentration, reading and spelling.

Vitamins and minerals are also keys in this whole process, of course. Without these vital nutrients many of the body's essential biochemical path-ways won't function. Organic produce which contains no additives have been proven to have higher concentrations of vitamin and antioxidant

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content, making them the best choice for your children's wellness. However if the diet is less than ideal, supplementation will at least help rectify this problem (for example a B complex and fish oil are especially important if your child is a picky eater).

How can you best make positive choices for your children?

Go back to eating natural whole foods, enrol your children in the enthusiasm of real food (vs factory made food). Growing some culinary herbs on the patio, with a few cherry tomatoes or strawberries will show them how amazingly fresh, colourful and fun natural foods can be. And it is never too early to instil in your kids the ability to "tune in" to what makes their body feel good, vs what food doesn't agree with them. Children soon learn to avoid a sore tummy after bingeing on party food, if they are given safe boundaries and a little compromise and freedom to explore the power of food. Lead by example and remember the 80/20 rule - healthy balance is realistic and okay.

And if you have concerns about your child's eating patterns or notice any possible food intolerance or allergy it is always best to try discover the underlying causes. I can support you on this journey or refer you to a health professional that fits your families needs.