

School children and their changing nutritional needs

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As our kids enter their school-going years their growth is steady, but slower and somewhat less dramatic when compared to the rapid baby-toddler-to-little-person transformation. It's an interesting time nutritionally as school-going children tend to be more open to trying different foods and are developing their foodie likes and dislikes. They are more able and adept at learning about different foods and their nutritional impact, so you can really start communicating with them about the importance of food and healthy eating. Many of our lifelong dietary habits are rooted in this young life-stage.



According to Zelda Ackerman, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for ADSA ([The Association for Dietetics in South Africa](#)) the primary school-going age is an ideal time for parents to help set our children up for a lifetime of healthy eating. She says, “What happens around food in both the home and school is really important not just to ensure optimal nutrition for growing bodies, but to educate our children about how important daily food choices are to our overall health and our abilities to perform well in life. For instance, balanced nutrition is vital for developing strong bones, teeth and muscles, as well as supporting our immune system to prevent disease. However, it impacts too on our abilities to focus and learn in the classroom, and to achieve in sports and other physical activities.”

Physical growth demands energy, and children's energy needs are high. According to another ADSA spokesperson, Vanessa Clarke, also a Registered Dietitian, “These energy needs increase as children get older and are influenced greatly by a child's level of exercise. As children move through the various school levels, their energy demands will increase which means they need more carbohydrates, protein and fat to support necessary bodily functions and their growth. Children may also require increasing amounts of certain vitamins and minerals as they get older. Some children going through adolescence who are physically active each day may require more energy in the form of calories than even an adult female or male. It's also important to remember that children continue to grow and develop well beyond their tweens and during their teenage years into young adulthood.”

During your child's school-going years, it's essential to get a good start to the day in the form of a sufficient balanced breakfast, even if it is a breakfast on the go. A balanced breakfast means that the meal includes high-fibre carbohydrates (wholewheat toast, oats, granola), protein (eggs, cheese, yoghurt) and fat (avocado, nut butters, olive oil), as well as vitamins and minerals (fruit and/or veg). This sets them off to school with a powered up brain and energy to spend. It's typical for school-going children to need to eat four to five times a day – their snacks are really important, so don't skip or skimp on their lunchboxes.

What is an optimal school lunchbox?

Depending on their school age and their after-school activities, your child's lunchbox may be their snack or their midday meal. For older children participating in late afternoon after school activities, their lunchbox may need to contain their morning snack, lunch and afternoon snack. You need to adjust the quantities based on the day's schedule and your child's level of physical activity.

In order to ensure the lunchbox is optimal nutritionally, always strive for a balanced snack or a balanced meal containing all the essential nutrients. Focus on home-prepared wholefoods rather highly processed snack foods. Vanessa offers this suggestion:

- Include high-fibre carbohydrates such as wholewheat bread, wholewheat wrap or high fibre crackers such as Provitas. Choosing a high fibre option ensures they stay fuller for longer, and have a more sustained level of energy
- Add a fruit like an apple, naartjie, banana or nectarine
- Pop in a portion of vegetables such as sweet pepper strips, cucumber wedges or carrot sticks
- Include a protein portion by making a chicken mayo sandwich with the high-fibre bread, or add chicken drumsticks, meatballs, biltong or cheese
- Make sure they have their freshly filled up water bottle to meet their fluid needs. You can add a sprig of mint, a lemon slice or a few blueberries if they prefer flavoured water. Avoid any sugar-sweetened beverages that contribute towards obesity and tooth decay

If your child will be having a longer school day, add extra portions of fruit and veg and raw nuts, and consider including a yoghurt or smoothie. Older children participating in sports may also need an extra wholewheat sandwich and additional lean protein portions to help preserve lean muscle mass.

Dealing with the challenges of food at school

School tuck shops can be a source of food for your children, but parents need to be aware of what kinds of foods and drinks are on offer. There are many convenience and snack foods that, although marketed to children, are nutrient-poor and contribute to rising childhood obesity. School tuck shops that do not have well-informed, dietitian-led healthy eating policies often offer these types of foods because they are popular with children and drive profits. Zelda says, "Parents need to stand together and approach school governing bodies to raise their concerns about unhealthy food being offered at school. Of course, children like sweets, chocolates, crisps and sugary drinks – and if they are on offer, that's what they will choose. School tuck shops need to be committed to only offering healthy food, snack and drink options. A registered dietitian can help parents with a list of healthy tuck shop food and drink options."

Under-resourced South African schools also face school food challenges with many parents concerned about the nutritional quality of the school's nutrition programme. Zelda says, "Sometimes, there are problems around the inadequate supply of food to address child hunger, but a persistent issue is the lack of fresh vegetables and fruit. Here, parents can help to motivate or get involved in the establishment of school food gardens to supplement school meals. Many nutritious vegetables such as spinach, beetroot, tomatoes, beans and butternuts are easily grown by beginner gardeners. Schools often have the physical space to develop food gardens on the campus, which can include the planting of fruit trees. There are also school food gardening programmes that schools can join to access information and gardening resources."

What are the top tips for parents who are struggling to get their school-going kids to eat balanced meals?

Vanessa says:

- **Make it fun** - Children often 'eat with their eyes' so presenting visually appealing foods cut into fun shapes may entice them to try new foods

- **Get them involved** – Collaborating to prepare the daily lunchbox can help with combating fears over foods and increase likeliness to try and eat healthier foods
- **Variety is the spice of life** - Different foods provide different nutrients so offering an array of foods is key
- **Respect their tastes** - Always offer them something you know they will eat in their lunchbox or plate even if it is the same fruit or veg every day. Then add a different fruit or vegetable in with it. Children are more likely to try different foods if it is paired with a food they already like.
- **Talk about food and health** – Healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle should be an ongoing conversation in the home. Chat to your child about healthy eating, the demands on their bodies and how they are met by food and particular nutrients found in food. Understanding important nutrients and how they help their bodies shouldn't only be something they learn about in the classroom. Make healthy eating an enjoyable and shared family priority
- **Model healthy eating** – When it comes to our children, what we do is more important than what we say, and while they may not always listen to what we say, they are always observing what we do! Being their role model for healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle is one of the best ways you can help them become healthy eaters.

In conclusion, Zelda adds:

Parents are the suppliers of food to their school-going children. It is through your shopping selections and meal choices that they access healthy, balanced meals and snacks – or not. Create a healthy food environment at home by choosing to buy and prepare wholefoods and fresh foods that are easy to eat and freely accessible to your kids, while unhealthy food items are simply just not available in your home.

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