

As a parent, the nutritional needs of your toddler are a priority and it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the amount of information out there. The food a child eats in their early years can influence their dietary habits later in life

BY JACKIE NALUBWAMA

For many parents of nursery children, this is always the first time the child is away from home for many hours every week day. For many parents, the first thought is that they may not have much control over what they eat.

Parents and schools need to make sure that children have food. Packing healthy meals for breakfast and lunch and snacks will help keep children eating healthily.

Teaching your child about healthy foods empowers them to make good choices when at school.

When it comes to packing children's lunch boxes, the easiest foods that come to mind to most parents are carbohydrates.

However, Dr Praxedes Namaganda Kituuka, a consultant paediatrician at Doctor's Plaza on Gaba Road, in Kampala, advises parents to consider a balanced diet as opposed to carbohydrates.

"Ensure that they also have protein and vitamins. Protein can be got from sauces, such as beans, ground nuts or the expensive animal protein, such as eggs, meat and fish. Fruits and vegetables provide vitamins," she explains.

Kituuka explains that children are drawn to carbohydrates because they are either sweet or tastier than other foods.

The examples of tantalising carbohydrates are biscuits, cookies, crisps, chips, cake and bread.

Sometimes, in the hope of getting good meals for their children, parents take their children to expensive kindergartens that promise to feed them well. Some kindergartens charge as high as sh1m per child.

Ironically, some kindergartens may feed pupils on tea and bread, which Dr Chris Mwanje, a nutritionist, says is inadequate.

Mwanje says since kindergarten is primarily for children aged four to six years, they should be given the three major meals of the day.

Breakfast should be the largest meal for children compared to lunch, supper and snacks.

Mwanje explains: "Breakfast accounts for 35% of the recommended daily allowance of food. Lunch takes 25%, supper 25% and snacks 15%."

Breakfast is to jump-start the day, improve mood and concentration. Research shows that a healthy breakfast contributes to more concentration of children in class and such children, even miss fewer school days.

Mwanje adds that breakfast of tea and bread, maize, popcorn, left-over matooke (*gulu*) only provides glucose and sugar, which is the common breakfast in our society.

"It should be enriched with protein sources (roasted groundnuts, eggs, milk) as these enable a child to grow

Give your children a headstart, feed them right



Since children love snacks, Dr Mwanje says they should not be deprived of their joy



In addition to good food, Dr Mpiima says children should be encouraged to be physically active. Activity helps them feel good

normally according to their age," Mwanje says.

Porridge is highly recommended because it is filling, especially that made from soya millet and soya rice. He also suggests *munene* or amaranthus porridge, which provide proteins and carbohydrates.

On another note, Mwanje says porridge is easy to transport in cases of packed breakfast.

Besides porridge, Mwanje says fruits and vegetables are important to boost the immunity of the child since they are prone to infections, such as fungal ones, flu and coughs.

He suggests slices of fruits for the children, such as mangoes, pawpaws, watermelon and beetroot.

For vegetables, Mwanje says carrot, onion, tomato, greens and cabbage are good for immunity.

"Children are always attracted to coloured foods. So, these play part in increasing their appetite. Always add

4-5 different colours in a child's meal," Mwanje says.

At lunch time, Mwanje says children ought to have a balanced diet of protein — animal and plant sources — carbohydrates and vitamin-rich fruits and vegetables, in reduced amounts.

"In fact, a heavy lunch reduces a child's concentration span," he says.

Since children love snacks, Mwanje says they should not be deprived of their joy.

"They can take a snack with mostly healthy foods, such as yoghurt and fruits. They can be given often sausages, cookies, cakes or soda to prevent cravings, tooth decays and child obesity," Mwanje says.

He notes that supplements, such as herbs and spices, are recommended for children because they boost their appetite. Mwanje recommends that kindergartens should include cinnamon, ginger, cloves and moringa, among others, in their pupils' diet,

carbohydrates in their bodies.

Soda, biscuits and processed juices, are not healthy.

Dr Bukunya, however, advises parents against packing processed foodstuffs, such as soda, juices and biscuits, because most of them contain chemicals that are not good for the child's health.

She says sodas are sugar and colour and does not add any value to the child's growth and health. The packed juices in shops and supermarkets too, are not fresh, and contain preservatives.

Much as many parents prefer to pack biscuits and juices for their children, Dr Musoke-Bukunya encourages them to give them in minimal quantities, since they contain too much sugar, which could harm their teeth.

"Sugar is good, but should be taken in moderation," she says.

Meanwhile, Dr Jamiru Mpiima, a nutritionist working at Victoria University Health Care Centre in Kampala, says since kindergarten pupils are active throughout the day, they need a regular intake of food to help them concentrate while learning.

"Some children in that age group are fussy. Offer a variety of foods and regular meals and snacks, according to your budget," says Mpiima, who urges teachers to allow children to eat according to their appetite and without force or arguments.

Generally, Mpiima says children's eating plan should consist mostly healthy foods, such as lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs and legumes (beans and peas). It should also have whole-wheat bread and cereals, at least two servings of dairy foods daily and fresh or lightly processed fruit (jackfruit and pineapples) and vegetables (cabbage, eggplants and carrot).

Mpiima says snacks are an important part of a child's food intake for energy and nutrients. However, he urges teachers to give children healthy snacks.

Healthy snack suggestions include: fresh and dried fruits, or natural juice, yoghurt, bread with spread and pieces of vegetables.

In addition to good food, Mpiima says, children should be encouraged to be physically active from a young age. "Physical activity helps children feel good and promotes a healthy appetite," he says.

Since active children run or move around a lot, Mpiima says they need plenty of fluids, about three glasses of milk for calcium for bone development.

At a glance

Protein can be got from sauces such as beans, groundnuts or animal protein, such as eggs, meat and fish.

especially those who do with a proper appetite.

Kindergarten children can usually sense how much food their bodies need and eat enough to match this, but they can lose the natural ability if forced to eat. Encouraging children to 'clean the plate' or giving sweets as a reward can lead to longer-term problems of overeating.

Offer your child small serves to start and give more if they are still hungry. Meal sizes and overall food intake can vary day-to-day, depending on the child's activity levels and appetite.

Help children to learn about their body's hunger cues.

Dr Musoke Bukunya says fruits are also life-enhancing packed with vitamins, minerals, anti-oxidants and many plant-derived micronutrients.

She encourages schools to stock their canteens with fruits, so the students can buy, whenever they need more.

Children who are growing up also need more proteins and

Foods rich in protein

