



## Nutritious Food

Tips for keeping your children eating healthily after they have come home from school.

Fiona Hunter is an expert in nutrition and author of several health books, the most recent of which is *High Blood Pressure: Food Facts and Recipes*, with Angie Jefferson. In this article, follow Fiona's tips to help give your family the balanced diet they need.

### **Start early**

There is some research evidence to show that a window of opportunity exists where you have time to introduce new flavours to your child. When you are weaning them, introduce them to a variety and good balance of foods. Children will show a natural preference for sweet things, because breast milk is sweet, but make sure that they get those all important vegetables as well.

Always put vegetables on the plate, encouraging young mouths to try "just a little bit", and if they don't want the rest that's fine; encourage rather than nag them. Research shows that you sometimes have to introduce something on the plate 10 times before a child will try it. It just has to be there so that they become familiar with it.

When they get to toddler age and the potential for throwing a few tantrums increases, it's very important not to let food become an issue. Continue to encourage them to eat a variety of foods and a balanced diet with foods from each of the following food groups:

### **Starch / Carbohydrate**

Bread, cereals, rice, pasta

### **Protein**

Meat, fish, eggs, nuts and seeds

### **Dairy Products**

Milk, cheese and yoghurt

These are very important to young children because their limbs are growing quickly and Calcium is important for bones.

### **Fruit and Vegetables**

It should be five a day, for children and adults. Fruit and vegetables with meals and snacks between meals displace other less healthy ingredients.

### **Fats and Oils**

Use these in moderation. It is very important that children, particularly the under -5s,

shouldn't be given very low fat products otherwise it will be difficult for them to get the energy they need.

### **Sweets**

Give them sweet stuff, sugar and confectionary products in moderation, although it's not realistic to say never.

### **Drinks**

The best drinks for young teeth are water or milk. Don't let them get into the habit of drinking sweet drinks, but it is important that they are offered drinks regularly, because children become very easily dehydrated. However, don't let them fill up on less nutritious drinks between meals – things like fruit squash and fizzy drinks – because that will then spoil their appetite. If they want something to drink within an hour of lunch, they should be given water.

### **Smoothies**

Fruit in combination with fruit juice or milk make a good smoothie, and is a great way to persuade kids to drink milk if you blend it with some fresh fruit like strawberry and maybe yoghurt.

### **Portion size**

If your children can't eat a large portion of food the most important thing is that you give them some fruit and vegetables with every meal. So even if they are having a sandwich at teatime, you should chop up some carrot sticks, baby tomatoes, or half an apple and put it on the plate.

### **Family**

Children learn by example, so set a good one. Try to make mealtimes a family affair where you sit together at least once or twice a week. This provides much more of an opportunity, not just for nutrition, but to talk to them about what's going on at school and teaching them manners. Don't let them see you stuffing your face with biscuits and not eating properly.

It is always a really bad idea for mums that might be concerned about their weight to talk about slimming and being fat around young girls.

Try not to have meals in front of the TV, because if you're watching TV, you're not really focussing on your food, and are much more likely to miss those signals from the brain to the stomach saying "actually, I've had enough".

### **Variety**

Variety is a very important key and more and more it's a narrow range of food because we are all busy, but no one food or food group contains all the nutrients that we need, so the bigger the variety of foods that we eat the greater chance we have of getting all the good stuff.

High Blood Pressure: Food Facts and Recipes is published by Hamlyn and available from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) at £12.99.