



Clued Up Parents Fact Sheet



Breaking kids bad food habits

More than a quarter of children in the UK are overweight or obese - 26% of boys and 29% of girls.

There are strategies to break the cycle and guide your kids down a better nutritional path. Here are 5 bad habits and how to help your children break them:

1. Too much junk

It's understandable given the choice children tend to opt for - high sugar, high fat, high calorie snacks and processed food. The reason is they taste good and are readily available. Crisps, chocolate, cakes, biscuits, pizza, pies and chips would be many children's dream diet.

Break the habit!

It's not being mean to your kids to refuse demands for chocolate and crisps. It's hard not to bow to the demands of pester power but tell yourself it's in their best long term interests. Avoid eating junk yourself. BE A POSITIVE ROLE MODEL.

Ideally start when they are young. "Eating patterns are created in early life so if you start kids on high processed foods it'll stick with them through to their teenage years," says consultant dietitian Helen Bond. "Instil a healthy eating principle and avoid relying on sugary and salty foods." Helen says chocolate and crisps are fine from time to time but snacks with a range of nutrients are much better.

"If it's not there they can't eat it so rid your kitchen cupboards of junk. If there are no biscuits or crisps in the house the children, if they're hungry, will have to pick something else. Keep a stock of snacks with a high nutritional value, like fresh fruit, yoghurts, oatcakes spread with peanut butter, dried fruit and nuts."

2. Not enough routine

Eating on the go and at irregular times is commonplace and can lead to making bad nutritional choices. In bygone days many families all sat down at a table to dinner at a specific time. Mum probably didn't go to work and had prepared the meal from scratch. That's not an option for most people in modern life. Both parents may work, children have busier lives and many families are time poor. Kids and adults may eat at different times because of work commitments. If that happens it's tempting to stick some classic kids' food into the oven, like chicken nuggets and smiley faces. Not too great on the healthy eating front. A survey in 2011 claims that around 1 in 10 families never have time to sit down to eat together during the week.

Break the habit!

Bring back a better routine. It may not be every night but as often as you possibly can have family meals around the table.

If you eat together and eat the same food children are more likely to eat healthily. If they see parents eating vegetables they're more likely to do the same. They get to experience different flavours and become less picky.

Research suggests that children who have a family meal three or more times a week are less likely to be overweight and more likely to have a healthy pattern of eating as they get older than those who share less than three meals a week together.

Ideally have a good diet of three meals a day, sitting down to eat when you can and make mealtimes fun in a relaxed setting.

3. Too many distractions

So you've managed to get your family all in the same place at the same time to eat a meal but you've still got to battle against the lure of screens.

Depending on the age of your child it could be the TV, MP3 player, phone, tablet or laptop. If they're glued to the goggle box or texting a mate they are far more likely to be eating distractedly and eating too much, just shovelling the food into their mouths without really tasting it or realising when they are full.

4. Too fussy

Many children are picky or faddy eaters. Maybe your child will only eat orange food; fish fingers and baked beans could feature a lot!

Maybe they hate tomatoes, won't touch brown bread or drink milk. Quite a few of them have odd preferences surrounding food and not many are what you'd call adventurous!

Given a choice not many kids will be hooked on celery or salmon, it's more likely to be pizza. It's not good to cut out food groups for children as they are still growing.

Don't forget dairy as when they are children you have a once in a lifetime opportunity to pack their bones with calcium, so offer them yoghurt, cottage cheese and milk.

5. Drinking too many calories

Fizzy drinks are a favourite with kids but they are full of sugar.

The pressure group Action on Sugar sampled more than 200 sugar-sweetened fizzy drinks from major supermarkets. Branded drinks as well as supermarkets' own brand products were tested. They found that 79% of the drinks contained 6 or more teaspoons of sugar per 330ml can.

In fact, according to the National Diet and Nutrition Survey, children aged 4 -10 get 16% of their total sugar from soft and fizzy drinks and children aged 11-18 get 29% of their intake from these.

Beware too of flavoured water and so called sports drinks, they often contain as many calories and as much sugar as fizzy drinks. Even fruit juice should be limited to a small 125ml glass. It counts as one of your five-a-day fruit and vegetables but it's high in natural sugar so it's pretty calorific.

Break the habit!

Brace yourselves and ban gadgets at mealtimes! Insist on it, make it a family rule that you also keep to.

"Turn off the TV, sit down to eat and make it a family affair with no distractions," says Helen.

"They are less likely to overeat if they aren't distracted. Watch the portion sizes you give to children. Encourage them to enjoy their food but not to eat too much. Use smaller plates, bowls and spoons if they tend to eat too much."

Break the habit!

Keep offering different foods to them. "Expose children to a wide range of foods at an early age," advises Aisling. "They may not like it straight away but be persistent as it takes 10 to 14 exposures before they decide if they like it.

"She says never force them to eat anything but never offer an alternative. "If they won't eat their pasta and vegetables don't give them something else."

Think creatively about what you give them. "In their lunch box forget the white, processed bread, try wraps or flatbreads or do a skewer of tomatoes and red pepper with a pot of humus," says Helen.

Break the habit!

Water, water, water all the way. It's thirst quenching and is vital to all of the cells in our bodies. What's more it's free and has no calories.

Make it more appealing to kids by keeping a jug of icy cold water in the fridge with slices of orange or lemon in it.

All that children need to drink ideally is water and small amounts of milk. Start this young as they won't know any different.