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Welcome to Issue 17 of our Bulletin, updating you on issues of importance or topical interest relating to nutrition and physical activity of older people. In this issue, we reprint with permission a very timely article by Lea Stening, Consultant Dietitian, and a long standing member of the New Zealand Nutrition Foundation

Grandparents can help fight childhood obesity

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Parents and Grandparents can greatly influence the environments that children grow up in and many of the experiences that they have.

Research is now showing the food preferences children develop are determined by a combination of both environmental and genetic factors. For instance there is evidence genetics affect such things as appetite, the speed of eating, responsiveness to feelings of fullness (satiety) and even the enjoyment of food.

However the environmental factors, that also play an important role in modelling eating behaviours, need consideration⁽¹⁾.

Fighting obesity in children is a family affair

Currently 32% of New Zealand adults are overweight and another 28% are obese. On top of this 10% of children are also obese. So being overweight is becoming accepted as the new norm in many OECD countries.

"Wake up" to obesity

Research in the Netherlands recently found the majority of parents failed to recognise overweight or obesity in their 5 and 11-year-old children. Children with normal weight were considered by their parents as a little too light. Overweight children were regarded as normal weight and obese children were considered normal or a little too heavy. This underestimation of overweight may impair a parent's motivation to seek help^(2,3).

Unfortunately, as fat gathers around the abdomen, the function of the organs found here (the liver, pancreas and gallbladder) that normally process fat and sugar, becomes impaired. This causes the fat and sugar levels in the blood to rise, thereby increasing the risk of developing diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, some forms of cancer, and respiratory illness.

As children gain weight they experience more fatigue, they feel sluggish and find it difficult to concentrate at school. Obesity leads to problems with bone density as their growing bones struggle to bear their extra body mass. They may also experience a loss of confidence and mood fluctuations as their weight increases.

Grandparents can offer support to parents when they recognise that feeding problems may exist in their children. Also they can help to educate the young about the importance of good nutrition for physical and mental development and disease prevention.

Grandparents need respect

Grandparents are special people who have much to offer the world. No longer considered “old”, grand parenting today means being vital, up-to-date, active and involved ⁽⁴⁾. The relationship grandparents have with their own children changes as they watch them become parents. Where once they may have “jumped right in” and assisted their child to cope with life’s challenges, grandparenting is a time to stand to one side, offering them support and wisdom when it is needed.

Grandparents never stop learning

When providing food for young children, it is important grandparents take the time to learn about current nutritional guidelines as feeding practices for children have changed dramatically over the past 10-20 years. Here are some prime examples:

- **Breast feeding** is best and women need to be encouraged and supported to keep feeding for as long as possible.
- **The introduction of solids** are delayed until 6 months unless there is a food allergy, in which case some foods can be introduced by 4-5 months on consultation with the child’s doctor or dietitian.
- **When introducing milk**, modified or whole milk is best up until 2 years; then light blue® or mega milk®. Trim® or calcium trim® is preferable from 5 years on. For more information read Lea’s article [Milk matters](#).
- **An allergy to cow’s milk**, depending on severity, may necessitate that a child requires a modified formula to drink for the first 12-18 months and may then move onto soy or rice milk as guided by its paediatrician.
- **Fat** is important for the development of brain and nerve tissue. However this is available in sufficient amounts in staple foods such as meat and cheese without the addition of butter, 62% of which is saturated fat. Polyunsaturated fats in the form of margarines, fish, avocado and nuts are healthier sources of fat for children.
- **Food allergies** need to be respected and grandparents are advised to avoid trying to set up food challenges when their grandchildren (with known allergies) come to stay. Be guided by the child’s parent or doctor as to any foods that should be avoided.
- **Trying new foods** is to be encouraged. However children should not be pressured to “clean up their plates” if they are feeling full as over-riding a child’s sense of fullness can make it hard for them to regulate their own food intake as they get older. Obviously, be guided by a child’s growth rate and for more information read Lea’s article “[Who controls feeding: the mother or the child?](#)” as well as “[Picky eating affects all age groups](#)”.
- **Sweetened soft drinks, fruit juice and sports drinks** are fine for the odd special occasions but if drunk on a regular basis can be a major source of calories, sugar and salt. Milk and water are kinder to their teeth and weight. For alternative beverage ideas, read Lea’s article “[What are our children drinking?](#)”
- **Take care with party “treats”**. Grandparents need to find other ways to “treat” children rather than feeding them lollies, crisps, cakes and biscuits when they come to visit. If you are needing party ideas refer to Lea’s article “[Party plans for children](#)”.

- **Takeaway foods** such as eating fish and chips may have been a “treat” when grandparents were young and now and again they do no harm. However there are now much healthier takeaway meals for children to eat. Try hamburgers, subway®, sushi, souvlaki, pizza or Asian meals or for other ideas read Lea’s article [“Healthy ideas for family takeaway meals”](#).

Keeping children active is essential to family health

Being healthy is no longer just about weight control and fitness. It is about helping to develop a child’s talents, giving children jobs to do, having friends and family and feeling safe and loved. As their confidence and self-esteem grows they learn to value their body and the things they can do. It is never too late to find new talents or activities to occupy the time.

Cooking

Cooking can be messy but allows children to have fun as they practise how to weigh, measure and count. While making biscuits and sweets can be helpful if running a stall at school or fund-raising, it is important to teach children how to make every day foods. Creating a salad or pizza, a batch of scones, muffins or loaf of bread can prove to be a lot of fun and provide healthier options. For more ideas read Lea's article ["Teach your child to cook for better health"](#).

Shopping

Taking children to the supermarket or growers’ markets can be fun for young children and a learning opportunity as they help to fill bags of fruit and have the chance to see fruits, vegetables, plants and cheeses and foods that they may not normally see at home.

Make time to play

Taking children to the park, kicking a ball, rowing (with your help), biking, playing field games, learning to vacuum and clean are all opportunities to encourage children to become more active, to expend energy and learn skills that improve their hand and eye co-ordination. For information regarding activities suitable for different age groups read Lea’s article [“Playtime helps combat obesity”](#).

Develop crafts

Teaching children to knit and sew, to build and make things is a luxury that few parents have time for these days. Grandparents can help to fill this important knowledge gap if they introduce children to activities such as these. Helping to nourish children’s creativity not only occupies time more constructively than watching a TV set but also helps them build fine motor skills and self-esteem as they complete new tasks.

Grow gardens

Children love to grow things so teach them how to plant seeds and to garden. If a grandparent is unable to attend to their own garden, then show them how to grow pots of herbs, carrots or radishes.

Care for animals and the environment

Not all households have pets these days. Teaching children how to care for animals helps them develop empathy for others. A trip to a wildlife park, or aquarium, even simply going to feed the ducks gets children outdoors. Visiting parks and gardens, taking them fishing or camping can also help children to learn more about their environment and how to respect it.

Children are naturally curious

Grandparents can teach children a lot about history simply by taking them to a museum, an Anzac parade, historic parks, the art gallery or library. Plenty of people will teach children how to Google for information but taking time to learn first-hand about their environment helps them work with and appreciate reality.

Value time

Time is the biggest “treat” to give to our children and is often in short supply in busy modern families. Taking the time to read stories and play games when they are little, to encourage the development of their talents as they grow, to listen to their success stories and be there in times of need all contribute to creating a healthy environment for them to grow up in.

Lead by example

Children are always watching adults and mimicking their behaviour. So in order to be a “good team leader”, grandparents need to look after their own health as well. Eating regular meals, taking exercise, developing talents, learning new things and asking for help when needed all encourage children to do the same.

References

1. Scaglioni S, Arrizza C, Vecchi F, Tedeschi S. Determinants of children’s eating behaviour. Am J Clin Nutr doi:10.3945/ajcn.110.001685.
2. Wu T, Dixon WE Jr, Dalton WT 3rd, Tudiver F, Liu X. Joint effects of child temperament and maternal sensitivity on the development of childhood obesity. Maternal Child Health (Epub ahead of print 1 April 2010)
3. Vuoreal N, Saha MT, Salo MK. Parents underestimate their child’s overweight. Acta Paediatr 2010;99:1374-9.
4. Carlson R. The don’t sweat guide for grandparents. Making the most of your time with your grandchildren. Bantam Books 2001

For more information and the articles referred to here visit www.leastening.com

Celebrate Food: reinvigorating food in Aged Care

It is well understood that poor food quality and lack of choice are some of the contributing factors to under nutrition in the elderly. Unilever Food Solutions’ *Celebrate Food* Toolkit features **100 costed & nutritionally analysed** recipes to help make a step change in the quality of meals provided in Rest Homes and provide chefs with inspiration to reinvigorate their menus. To request your FREE kit, visit www.ufs.com

For more information about the resource, please contact Louise Bell, Nutrition and Health Assistant Manager, Unilever Food Solutions louise.bell@unilever.com