

Serving Up Academic Excellence (primary)

Can diet be modified to boost cognitive function? Absolutely. And the benefits of 'brain food' are not just significant, they're mouth-watering.

We've an exciting prospect before us. If the numerous refined and processed foods in the diet of schoolchildren were replaced with healthier alternatives - with foods that support cognitive function, a ground-breaking shift could result, offering benefits which may truly be remarkable.

It's long been claimed that eating fish is good for the brain, but science has now proven that without the omega-3 fatty acids our brains simply cannot function healthily. And there's strong evidence suggesting it was the omega-3 in fish that triggered the massive growth of the human brain thousands of years ago.

We know that choline, a fatty acid found in eggs and breast milk improves memory and learning. That the antioxidants found in blue berry fruits not only protect brain cells from damage by free-radicals, but also support the youthful brain by 'allowing it to breath'. And that these same antioxidants can slow cognitive decline into old age. We also know that whole grains provide the steady source of glucose needed, in copious amounts, by the immature brain, and that minerals such as magnesium, zinc and selenium found in rich supply in avocados, seeds and nuts are fundamental to making it all possible.

Making the Change

So how can teachers and schools share this information with parents and children for the benefit of all?

- School newsletters and websites are the perfect forum for an article about brain food which could incorporate recipes and quick ideas for simple, healthy breakfasts and lunches and could perhaps become a regular feature. Try our recipe on [page \(?\)](#) and share it via your school media.
- Invite a local nutritionist to speak at parent education events, particularly at the start of the school year when families are often looking for guidance and advice. And consider including the nutritional advice in school handbooks.
- Consider ways of incorporating this knowledge into the curriculum through practical lessons and projects.
- Noticeboards - eye-catching photos of important foods with a simple message can be absorbed quickly by students as they flit past. Share the word with your tuck shop and consider posting information in eating areas.
- Children are very much aware of the behaviour of the adults around them. Make use of that by modelling healthy eating and reap the benefits for yourself in the process.

Breakfast

Research has consistently shown that students who eat breakfast perform better at school.

And breakfast is an opportunity to introduce some really beneficial foods. Scrambled or fried eggs with wholemeal toast, or a bowl of porridge served with blueberries and sprinkled with cinnamon are great choices. If nuts are banned at school add them to muesli - just a handful of walnuts or brazil nuts provide enough omega-3 for a whole day of optimal brain processing. And when there's simply no time for breakfast, a portion of nuts and a sliced orange make an ideal portable alternative.

Mid-Morning Snack

Important for re-fuelling, a mid-morning snack is vital for the many children who do, unfortunately, miss breakfast. Now is the time for some fresh fruit and vegetables - a combination of berry fruits stirred into plain yogurt (frozen berries are an excellent choice) or some wholemeal crackers with mashed avocado (add some lemon juice to prevent browning).

Lunches

Tins or sachets of salmon are ideal for the lunchbox. Add some raw vegetables - carrot sticks, snow peas, capsicum and beetroot, or a steamed corn cob for example. Include all the colours to achieve a balance of nutrients. If you want to add something sweet, look for foods rich in eggs and whole grains, a cookie made with seeds (especially flax seeds), honey and dried fruit, or perhaps include a few squares of dark chocolate (70% cocoa-solids). And remember that home-made is usually best - many so-called 'healthy' packaged foods, particularly muesli bars, include a long list of unwanted ingredients which are there only for the benefit of the manufacturer.

We have the knowledge to actively support our children in their efforts to focus, remember and learn by regularly incorporating as many of these foods as possible as part of a healthy balanced diet. Mounting scientific evidence suggests the results in the classroom could well be outstanding.

Pullquote: The greater the exposure to pollution and fried food, the higher the risk of destruction of brain cells due to free-radicals.

Pullquote: Higher intakes of breads and cereals, and weekly fish consumption are associated with significantly higher intelligence scores with increases in IQ of nearly four points. [1]

References

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