Nutrition and mental health

When children and young people have access to nutritious food and a healthy relationship with eating, it can positively impact their lives.

How are nutrition and mental health linked?

Eating foods from a range of food groups can help children and young people cope better with stressors, manage their emotions and improve sleep – which are essential for their learning and development.

Most research about nutrition and mental health has focused on adults. We know that eating nutritious foods that provide adequate fuel and nutrition for that person's body and brain is associated with improved mental health outcomes. We also know that poor nutrition is associated with a greater risk of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety conditions.

Emerging research that focuses on children and young people is helping to better understand the link between nutrition and mental health in children and young people.

Food, eating behaviours and mental health are complex issues and influenced by many factors. Children and young people with lower nutrient dense diets are at an increased risk of experiencing emotional, behavioural and developmental challenges which may include:

- hyperactivity and/or increased frustration and aggression
- poor concentration, focus and tiredness
- decreased immune system function
- delayed brain and physical development
- low iron and iron deficiency, which has been linked to cognitive function impairments and memory
- nutrient deficiencies and malnutrition, which have been associated with mental health conditions including depression and anxiety
- poor academic performance
- mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety
- social and friendship challenges.

Many factors can affect whether a child or young person can access or eat nutritious food. These include:

- poverty/socio-economic status of families, employment situation, education background
- presence of illness or disease in caregivers
- sensory challenges that present in neurodiverse or neurodivergent children and young people.
- experience of an eating disorder.

'Food insecurity' – where people cannot access adequate food is a significant problem for many people and families in Australia.

The good news is that supporting children and young people with access to nutritious foods, as well as supporting positive attitudes and behaviours towards food and eating, can positively foster mental health and wellbeing.

Australian dietary guidelines

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend that everyone can benefit from increasing their intake of fruit, vegetables, complex carbohydrates and protein and reduce highly processed foods.

Changing lifestyles, greater demands on

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families, and financial pressures have contributed to increased consumption of processed foods which means children and young people are often not meeting the desired recommendations.

What can early learning services and schools do to encourage healthy eating?

Children and young people need support to learn about the role of food and nutrition, body functionality, and positive eating attitudes and behaviours.

While this work is often done by families at home, early learning services and schools can also play an important role in promoting positive eating, attitudes and behaviours in children and young people to support their development and learning.

Educators should take into consideration and be respectful of home environments, cultural differences, individual needs and food insecurity.

Early learning services

Early learning services can:

- create positive eating spaces where mealtimes are relaxed, enjoyable and comfortable.
- sit and eat with the children
- talk positively about all foods use neutral language if describing foods
- encourage children to take regular water breaks throughout the day
- be a good role model by eating a range of foods from all food groups
- teach children and young people about how foods help the brain and body to function
- provide opportunities for cooking or food preparation (for example making a fruit salad)
- plant a vegetable garden with greens that can picked and eaten (such as herbs and lettuce)
- encourage food curiosity
- have nutritious food available
- be mindful of how any messaging about food is communicated with families to avoid causing shame.

Schools

Schools can:

- offer nutrient-dense foods in the school canteen
- create a school vegetable garden and incorporate cooking activities in class using the produce you've grown
- incorporate 'brain breaks' for students to eat nutritious snacks in class, such as vegetable sticks or fruit
- allow students to have water bottles on their desks or bring them into the classroom
- be a positive role model and bring your own nutrient dense food
- use non-food rewards (pencils, stickers)
- create partnerships with the local community (such as local food growers or food markets) and utilise these partners in school projects and work experience opportunities
- contact or partnerships with organisations such as Foodbanks for school programs
- ensure there are no comments or shaming of young people's lunch boxes.

If you have concerns about a child or young person's ability to access nutritious concerns, raise this with your school leadership or wellbeing team.

External links

Eat for Health – Eating well

Eat for Health – Educator guide

Food and Mood Centre

Bibliography

Visit Nutrition and mental health for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

**Be You acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of all the Lands on which we work and learn.
We recognise their deep and ongoing connection to Country and pay our respect to Elders, past and present.**