

Helping children develop healthy nutrition habits

Nutritional health and well-being during childhood has a major bearing on people reaching their full potential both physically and mentally.

That's the reason the Canadian Dietetic Association and the Halton Regional Health Department have made children aged four to 12 the focus of their Nutrition Month campaign this March.

"Nourishing Our Children's Future" is the message dieticians across the country will be taking to parents and other caregivers.

"Childhood is a time of rapid growth and constant change as the very foundations of adulthood are being shaped," said Jessica MacKay of the regional health department. "Healthy eating and activity patterns that children develop in their early years will pay back health benefits throughout their lives."

According to the health department, there are approximately three million children between the ages of four and 12 in Canada. About 20 per cent of Canadian children under age 18 live in poverty. For many of these children, getting adequate amounts of nutritious food can be a challenge.

"Not all children are eating a good breakfast before heading off to school," says Ms MacKay. "Going to school hungry or undernourished can affect a child's physical and

mental performance.

"Breakfast clubs and programs are growing across Canada," explained Ms MacKay. "Dieticians have been strong supporters of these programs, particularly those which not only provide children with nourishing food, but also help them to learn important life skills such as healthy eating; buying and preparing food, and developing social skills."

Regardless of economic status, parents and other caregivers are eager but often unsure of how to give their children the best — and healthiest — start on life.

Fortunately, good eating practices are not difficult. According to Ms MacKay, daily meals and snacks should be based on all four food groups (grain products, vegetables and fruit, milk products and meat) outlined in Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating. Emphasis should be placed on grain products, fruits and vegetables. The number of servings actually eaten will depend on the size, age and activity level of your child.

"Work as a team with your children," says Ms MacKay. "Set a good example and provide a selection of nutritious foods. Children will decide how much they want to eat. As a rule of thumb, if children are growing, energetic and generally healthy, they are likely well nourished."



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