Building Healthy Eating Habit for Young Children

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Abstract
There are a few factors that make many children like to eat junk food more than the food prepared by their parents. Therefore, there is a great need for parents these days to build healthy eating habits for their children quite early in their life for at least three important advantages: good body function with more energy, diseases prevention, and future transfer of healthy lifestyle.

Keywords: body functions, diseases, healthy lifestyle, eating habits, future generation

Introduction
Parents generally want to give the best of everything for their children. That idea supposedly includes encouraging the right food in the right amount for their children to eat so that they can grow up to be healthy individuals. However, in reality, many parents are actually permitting their children to eat unhealthily, and putting them at risks of diseases (Wood 16). Parents often offer children various unhealthy snacks but only a few of healthy ones like fresh fruits (Ayoob). Parents actually have to know what healthy eating for children means specifically. If they have already known what healthy eating is, then they can teach about how to eat healthily and fix their children's dietary pattern. After all, there will never be a late moment to start fixing your diet and your health (O'Dea 3) and even to teach children too. Healthy eating doesn't merely mean encouraging fruits, vegetables, wholegrain, and lean protein sources (qtd. in DrGreene,). Actually it means encouraging a child to eat [but not overeating] a variety of foods so that a child gets the nutrients (such as protein, carbohydrate,
fat, vitamins, and minerals) he or she needs for growth that absolutely doesn’t include foods with poor nutrition like soft drinks and chips (Rea, Healthy).

If we really look at the eating habit that people at our surroundings (in this case people with enough money to buy food) have, we will be quite surprised. The examples are taken from USA, the developed country that has become the trendsetter for the whole world to follow, from fashion to food. In 1998, the report of American Medical Association titled Children’s Nutrition Study that surveyed seven hundred parents resulted in these facts:

Ninety-nine percent of parents agreed that it is important for their children to eat nutritious food. Twenty-seven percent (largest percentage) parents picked soft drinks as their children’s preferred drink over any beverage. Children eat fatty foods (like chips and other snacks) nearly five times a week on average. Three out of four parents are not concerned that their children drink too many soft drinks or that they only like junk food. Eighty percent of parents said that they were familiar with the food guide pyramid; however, less than half said they used it to plan their children’s meals. (qtd. in Wood 20).

Actually, if we are to question the factors that make children nowadays have the habit of eating unhealthily, aside from the ignorant parents there are several of them. The first one is of course the food and beverage marketing; they make children leave healthful diets and have risks in their health (Committee 374). Commercial television is full with advertisement for sugar-packed and fat-packed foods that also lack in nutrients (Ward 225). Moreover, these attractive foods’ advertisement comes out in cartoon programs and other programs intended for children, making them having the desire to buy many unhealthy foods (Cutting 5).

The second factor is that more unhealthy foods are available. There is over twelve thousands new processed food choices introduced every year in the United States (Wood 18). It is also easier to eat junk food nowadays; their sizes are very large these days also (Nonas). Moreover, if candy and soft drinks are always available, most children will choose these foods rather than a healthier snack. After all, infants are born liking sweet taste (qtd. in Rea, Healthy).

The third factor would be that more passive and engaging activities available, like cable TV, VCR, and Nintendo (Wood 19). Children nowadays are less active than ever and they rarely do many physical activities (Nonas); the inactive lifestyles are putting children’s future at risk (Committee 2). Moreover, children usually eat snacks when they do these inactive activities, making them vulnerable to diseases associated with weight problems and laziness.
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It is important for parents to build healthy eating habit for children since early ages. This habit has to be implemented by parents themselves only and have to be done as early as the child can eat. After all there is a saying that says that we can not expect children to have the habit of eating healthy food suddenly when they are grown-up if they haven’t been taught how to do it (Cutting 5). Moreover, our food choices depends on several factors, one of it is childhood experience with food and eating time (O’Dea 1). There is a study that shows that children who eat with their families rather than alone in front of TV will enjoy a healthy diet more and have better dietary pattern (Owen). Another study also found that children usually followed their parents’ dietary patterns (Ward 226). There are three advantages of building healthy eating habit for children.

Good Body Functions and More Energy
The first advantage is because children who have the habit of eating healthy foods in moderate amounts develop good body functions, primarily the brain, along with great amount of energy. In the first five years (the golden ages), nutrition is really needed to physical and mental development of a child (Asydhad and Mardiah iii). It also has to be noted that the physical development of a child is a permanent state meaning that it can not be repaired or changed later in the child’s life (O’Dea 45), making it crucial to build the habit in a child’s early years in life. Another opinion from Stoch and Smythe (1963) states that nutrient deficiency in early years of life can cause untreatable defects and obstruct the next growing process (Asydhad and Mardiah 3).

Brain is the most important body part because it controls everything that we do everyday. The significance of brain development in early years of a child’s life can be seen from the fact that sixty percent of foods that babies eat are used solely for the development of the brain (Asydhad and Mardiah 2).

Pek Hiem Liang (1986) emphasizes the importance of building healthy eating habit for children for the brain; he states that the development of intellectual ability of children aged five to fifteen is very much influenced by their nutrition in their preschool ages. (Asydhad and Mardiah 1). One expert also writes that the best function of nutrition for children is the optimal development of the brain, high intelligence level, and the academic achievement of a child (qtd. in O’Dea 45). A finding by Dr. Ayoob states the evidence that nutrition makes a big difference for kids is most obvious with breakfast. Kids seem to do better on memory tests...math tests...and they seem to be much more focus on their school work (qtd. in Ayoob). Apart from brain, other bodily functions also include bones. Vitamin K, found in green vegetables start the production of osteocalcin for the strength of bones (Ward 222).

Children who have the habit of eating healthy food will also have more energy while they are growing. Actually children at the age of six until eleven has realized the
benefits of healthy eating habit; when five thousands children were given questionnaires, they answered that healthy eating habit has benefits for them like giving energy, helping them grow, helping them to feel comfortable inside, sharpening concentration, and making the body felt fit (O’Dea 4). Giving children nutritious foods and drinks will help them to maintain energy with stability all day; the ones that don’t have breakfast actually have decreased rate of energy (O’Dea 50).

Diseases Prevention

The second advantage on the importance of teaching children about healthy eating habit is because healthy foods can prevent children from being ill due to some diseases related with diets. Childhood is an important age for children to be given different kinds of nutritious foods, such as protein, zinc, and vitamin C, to develop immunity in children’s bodies (O’Dea 48). If the immunity rates are high in children’s bodies, then of course diseases, common diseases and serious diseases specifically, can be prevented from happening to children. There are many common diseases that can be prevented from happening to children if they have the habit of eating healthily; some of them are infection, flu, allergies, also dental cavity.

Children who suffer from malnutrition produce less white blood cell and other cells for immunity; making them having infection more frequently than those who have healthy eating habit. Moreover, children who have poor nutrition actually eat less and less; this makes infections and malnutrition even more severe. As the consequences of having less cells for immunity, children who lack nutrition tend to have flu and other common diseases (O’Dea 48).

Asthma also one of the common diseases that attack children, the 1996 statistics from the Centers for Disease Control states that the diet of infants and young children can control how bad an allergy will be (Wood 17).

The other common disease (dental cavity) really is influenced by the food choices: it is clear that foods that we consume affect the development of teeth decay and this starts at early ages (qtd. in O’Dea 74). Ward, a pediatrician says that whatever the case, a healthy diet ... help stop cavity formation; recommended food to prevent dental cavity includes at least two servings a day from dairy food, which contains vitamin D to support and hold teeth in place and vitamin C that forms collagen, which is necessary for gum health. (Ward 212-213). It has to be noted that although fruits and vegetables also dairy products are good for children, they still have to brush their teeth after every meal (O’Dea 76).

It has been estimated that a poor diet and lack of activity contribute to about 300,000 preventable deaths in USA per year...This is second only to smoking-related deaths according to McGinnis (qtd. in Wood 19). This means that healthy eating is a serious matter, a matter between life and death that threatens to ruin humans’ lives.
If we let children have poor eating habit, they will be attacked by many serious diseases that can lead them to death sooner or later, serious diseases like degenerative diseases, osteoporosis, obesity, and learning disabilities.

The first serious diseases are degenerative diseases. There are many degenerative diseases that connect with dietary choices everyday. They are cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes ... (Rea, Long Term); various cancers also can be prevented with good nutrition in childhood and in the children’s whole life (O’Dea 49).

Cardiovascular disease or heart disease is the leading cause of death in the USA and in many Westernized countries around the world; as more countries adopt Western diets and lifestyles, the incidence of heart disease is climbing (qtd. in Wood 17). Heart disease actually is formed since childhood (preschool age) (Cutting 5). In order to reduce the risks of heart disease and stroke, it is advised to follow a healthy diet with a lot of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and fat free or low fat dairy products (Homocysteine).

Type 2 diabetes, which previously known as adult-onset diabetes, has more than doubled in the past decade among children and youth (qtd. in Committee 1); when in 1970 type 2 diabetes made up two percent of new cases of diabetes in children nine to nineteen years, in 2000 this number rose to thirty to fifty percent in children (qtd. in Wood 19), these cases of diabetes happens because children are engaged in unhealthy eating habit so in order to avoid diabetes type 2 it is advisable to start building the healthy eating habit for them.

Childhood cancer has risen almost eleven percent in the past decade in USA according to Miller. Some experts predict that more or less eighty percent of cancers are caused by environmental factors; antioxidants in foods that come from fruits and vegetables actually help getting rid of those factors (Wood 17, 22). It seems that on the whole, the groups of people consuming the greatest amount of fruits and vegetables run the lowest risk for developing cancers of the skin, lung, cervix, esophagus, stomach, colon, pancreas, breast, and prostate; eating right, staying physically active and maintaining a healthy weight from childhood can also cut chances of adult cancer by sixty to seventy percent according to American Institute for Cancer Research (qtd. in Ward 207). The estimation is healthier diets and exercise could reduce cancer cases by thirty to forty percent worldwide every year (Wood 20).

The second serious disease is osteoporosis. Osteoporosis affects twenty million Americans in a year according to American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons (Wood 17). To prevent it from happening in adulthood, children should be encouraged to build healthy eating habit since the National Institutes of Health says osteoporosis must begin in childhood (Ward 219). Most bone calcium is kept in bones and teeth during childhood and early adulthood, which makes this time very crucial to prevent bone disease later on in life (Ward 221). It is actually really important to guide especially
girls to have healthy lifestyle to prevent osteoporosis in menopause age since it happens a lot of times (Ward 220).

The third serious disease is obesity. Keep in mind that obesity has beaten smoking to be the first non-disease [actually not really considered as disease] killer in the USA (Ahlers and Tallman, Childhood). Obesity now affects one in five children in the USA and is the most serious nutritional disease of young people according to Dietz (Wood 16). Someone is considered as obese if they have BMI (divide weight in kilograms by height in meters squared) at or above ninety-fifth percentile (Overweight). Obesity is dangerous because it can cause children to have sleep apnea, diabetes type two, hypertension, high cholesterol, also to suffer socially (being made fun of and not able to participate in sports, socially rejected) (Nonas).

There is growing evidence that the early life environment is an important factor whether someone will have obesity or not later in life according to Reilly et al. (Committee 17) and that included two environmental factors: the state of the child's current body and the state of the parents' current bodies.

Overweight children are more likely to be overweight adults (qtd. in Overweight), so if the state of the child's current body is overweight then it is more likely for the child to be overweight or obese adults. Children under three who don’t have one or more obese parents are at low risk for obesity later in life according to a study in New England Journal of Medicine (qtd. in Ward 224), which means obese parents' children will be more likely to be obese. Therefore, both parents and children have to start to build their healthy eating habit seriously if both don’t want their children or themselves to have obesity and all those diseases.

The last serious disease is ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). Statistics from 1998 estimate that three to five percent of school-aged children have it and what causes it actually is nutrient deficiency; ADD can influence learning and behavior (Wood 17) and of course, logically, children's future life. So, those who want children to have bright future should immediately implement healthy eating habit in children's lives.

**Future Transfer of Healthy Lifestyle**

The third advantage on the importance of teaching children about healthy eating habit is because children will definitely maintain the habit in the future; perhaps even extend the habit to others as health-related behaviors such as eating habit and physical activity patterns develop early in life and often extend into adulthood (qtd. in Committee 2). It is said that if parents are successful to educate children age three until five well then children will have good and healthy eating habit in their adulthoods (Karyadi and Kolopaking 86). Researchers also find that children who are early to
develop healthy eating habit also continue to exercise without any guidance from adults (Ward 203).

O’Dea says that children start to develop their eating habit since they are born and the habit is still being done by the children for their whole life; later on they will pass down the habit of eating healthily to their children (O’Dea 52). If the next and next generations have healthy eating habit too, then of course healthy future generations will be created (O’Dea vii).

Conclusion

Many of diet changes began in childhood; therefore, children should start early and learn healthy lifestyle of eating to give them bright future (Wood 15). It is of course not easy for parents to teach their children how to build healthy eating habit for them since there are so many outside influences that make them eat otherwise such as more food advertisements, more fast food available, more passive and engaging activities available and also the fact that parents sometimes don’t realize the meaning of healthy eating. However, once it is done, it will save the children a golden opportunity to enjoy this life healthily and of course happily; children will have good body functions with more energy, children will have the ability to prevent diseases (common ones and serious ones), and they will maintain the habit in the future, becoming healthy citizens that can contribute to the nations and even create generations of healthy citizens.

There is a saying that says ‘It is better to prevent than to treat’ that has a meaning in this context that it is better for us to teach children on how to build healthy eating habit for children rather than just let them eat unhealthily and then regret what we have done later on in life. Health depends on good nutrition (qtd. in Cutting 6) and the truth is that most children are not getting the nutrition they need (qtd. in Wood 16) which means that they won’t be healthy. If we don’t start now to build healthy eating habit for both us and the children then when? Is it when we all attacked by diseases and lying in hospital bed that we finally want to eat healthily as a habit? The answer is of course surely not.

There is never a late moment in life to start altering your food and your health, even those who are lying in hospital beds right now. Start with your family; when the whole family eats together, pick only healthy foods to eat. Only various foods with good nutrition should be served, excluding children’s favorites like hamburgers and soda drinks. Parents should be the one that teach their children on eating healthily because there is a finding that seventy seven percent of young children says that their parents and relatives are their primary source of weight-control information (Ward 226). Eating together as a family is a good start to eat healthily,
after all families that eat together regularly tend to have a healthier diet and successful relationships (Owen).

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