

Planning Meals For Children

Children can sometimes be picky eaters and the dilemma of many parents is to prepare meals that are highly nutritious and tasty.

With the start of the new school year new school year the Ministry of Health and Environment, is appealing to parents to make the value of good nutrition and meal planning a priority. The Ministry's Paediatric Dietician and Nutrition Internship Co-ordinator Deon Bent emphasized that good nutrition is very important for school age children, who are still in their developmental stage.

With rising food costs becoming an increasing concern for most people, meal planning is crucial to fulfilling the nutritional needs of children. Miss Bent noted that when parents plan meals, it helps them to efficiently manage their budgets and enables them to provide more appealing and nutritious meals. She added that 30 per cent of a child's energy or nutritional requirements are consumed in that one important mid-day meal. "Like breakfast and dinner, a child's lunch should be well planned and include a wide variety of foods from the six food groups," she points out. "Parents need to ensure that they get their daily intake of the major nutrients, such as protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins, minerals, water and fibre," she explained.

She acknowledges that some foods may not rank high as favourites, but added that children can be motivated to eat healthy meals, particularly vegetables. "When parents are planning meals they should bear in mind a number of factors, such as the colour, texture, shape, method of preparation and the flavour," she explains. Ms. Bent says that while some children may not be keen on eating a whole carrot, the same vegetable presented in an inviting format can lure the child into eating it.

Although there may be a wide variety of fruits, such as oranges, tangerines, pineapples and watermelons available, children sometimes shun these fruits, because of how they are presented. While they may not want to eat these fruits in their whole state, she says, with minor adjustments, they may be more willing to eat diced pineapple slices or segmented oranges or tangerine, than these fruits as a whole.

Reiterating the need for meals to reflect food choices from the six food groups, Ms. Bent offers examples of food or meal ideas from some of these groups. Bread, biscuits, cereal type products, such as cornflakes, and starchy tubers and crops, such as potatoes and bananas, she notes, are all staples and supply the body with carbohydrates.

The protein group includes food, such as chicken, fish, cheese and milk, which she explains, is a good source of calcium for building healthy bones and teeth. Legumes, she states, may take the form of nuts. "Whole grains, such as nuts, should not be given to children 1 to 4 years of age; instead, they should be mashed or cracked to prevent choking."

For parents who give their children the freedom to purchase their lunches, Ms. Bent suggests they engage their students in regular nutrition talks that will inform the children's purchasing decisions. She is imploring parents to inform their children of the role that different food types play in their education process and in maintaining good health; for example, those that improve memory and growth, and those that help to prevent chronic diseases.

She is urging parents to discourage children from purchasing foods that are high in sodium or salt or sugars, such as cakes, pastries or sweetened beverages, as many of the chronic diseases later on in life are caused by too much animal fat in the diet or too much salt or sugar.

Meal providers such as concessionaires and restaurateurs, are also being urged to begin to take responsibility for the nation's children, their health and ultimately their productivity. She asks that they vary their cooking methods and limit their use of frying, which contributes a lot of fat. "Instead of frying, do some baking, do some grilling and remove the skin and the fat.

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