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Nutrition and the Young Child

By Anne-Marie Fryer Wilboltt

“May I please have some more of everything?” is a typical question asked in my kindergarten around our lunch table. Everyday we cook a simple, hot, delicious meal for the 16 children in our class. Parents are delighted that their children receive beautiful, wholesome meals, bountiful in nutrition, served in a calm, joyous atmosphere. We have designed a weekly lunch and snack menu that varies slightly with the seasons of the year. It includes nourishing soups, a variety of whole grains, locally grown vegetables and seasonal fruit, beans, eggs from free-range chickens, fermented foods, high quality oils, and fresh local butter from grass-fed cows. The children are part of the whole process from picking food to cooking, setting the tables, and clean-up. A healthy relationship with food and nature is one of the most important relationships a child can make. It is the foundation from which they build the rest of their lives.

The nutritional aspect of child development is of greatest importance. A diet of wholesome, seasonal foods supports clear, open, and positive thinking, a healthy inner life of feeling, and strong motivation to fulfill our life’s tasks and purposes. During the years through high school the children grow and develop into young adults. The opportunities we give the children to be nourished in body and soul lay the foundation for becoming healthy, self-motivated, confident, caring citizens in the world. The future health of humanity and the earth depends largely upon us--parents and caregivers of children.

Quality

A carrot is just not a carrot. When, where, and how it is grown determines the quality and nutritional value. The first part of the lesson will discuss the life forces of food, and especially organically and biodynamically grown foods.

Life Forces of Food

What determines the quality of various foods is more than what meets the eyes. When we first look at a carrot we usually only notice the outer manifestations of matter. In reality what we see is the physical outcome of what has been created by invisible life forces. The carrot is in itself an activity that is constantly changing and metamorphosing.

In order to see the activity of a carrot plant and the creative life forces forming it, imagine a tiny seed sprouting and growing into a lovely vermilion red, sweet, crisp carrot with green tops. Observe first the root of the carrot growing downward vertically around its center. Compared with its leaves it is dense with matter. The carrot tops, on the other hand, are drawn upwards toward the periphery, spreading out horizontally. They are lighter and slender with an almost lacy look. Already we notice two opposite, yet complementary, forces at work that qualitatively are completely different. One is the downward-spiraling centripetal force which is often referred to as gravity, and the other is the upward-spiraling

centrifugal force known as levity. Whereas the force of gravity is connected with the earth, so is the force of levity connected with the cosmos.

To really understand the essence of nutrition requires the courage to reimagine the world and bring to our consciousness a view other than the purely material. The quality of our food, and especially the life forces of the meal we eat, is of greatest importance in the light of healthy child development.

Organically Grown Food

Foods that are grown on farms where pesticides and herbicides have not been used for at least three years, among other requirements, are referred to as organically grown foods. The regulations required in order for food to be called organic must follow the NOP guidelines, a “ceiling standard.” It is a process at present overseen by the USDA and certified organizations. Organic foods are in high demand and now readily available in many big supermarkets. This demand has grown so much in the past decade that a real industry has developed around it. Many organic foods are today mass-produced and grown in places where the cheapest labor can be found. Fortunately there are still a lot of local, small organic farmers who produce excellent quality foods.

Biodynamically Grown Food

The best quality of food that I am familiar with is called biodynamic. Biodynamic grapes have won nationwide popularity for their excellent taste and aroma, producing fabulous wines. The quality of biodynamic is concerned not only with the environment that the food is grown in but also with the qualitative processes in which the food is created. Cultures of the past, and perhaps some of our own grandparents, were aware that their crops received nourishment from the earth as well as the cosmos; the rhythmical cycles of the moon, the sun, and the stars. They worked the land according to their observations of these cycles and treated their animals, plants, and soil in a way that reflected this relationship. Biodynamic gardeners and farmers of today keep building on this respectful relationship.

Biodynamic farmers experience their farms as individual, self-sustaining, living organisms that live and breathe with the earth in a sea of cosmic life forces. Everything is alive for the biodynamic farmer or gardener and maintains connection to the spiritual cosmic world. The farmer or gardener sees it as his or her responsibility to cultivate this connection. S/he prepares the soil in such a way that it enables plants to take up the cosmic influences necessary for their growth, using special biodynamic preparations.

What distinguishes biodynamic farming from other healthy farming practices such as permaculture and organic farming is that biodynamic farmers consciously think and work in a practical way with these earthly and cosmic forces and rhythms. Sowing and harvesting are carefully done at the most favorable times in relationship to the sun, moon, and planetary rhythms. In addition to working with the cosmic rhythms and applying biodynamic preparations and composted cow manure, these farmers also maintain healthy soil with cultivation, crop rotations, incorporating plenty of organic matter, and other holistic agricultural activities.

Biodynamic farming practices are also regulated by certified organizations. Scientific research is carried out to develop a better understanding of the quality of biodynamic foods. Ideas are implemented, observations made, comparative testing done, and elaborate evaluations made in search of future agriculture practices in harmony with the living world filled with spirit.

Seasonal, Locally Harvested Foods

Whenever possible I use organic or biodynamic foods that are locally produced. Seasonal, locally grown foods harmonize with the environment we live in and resonate with the life forces and seasonal changes around us. Eating seasonally and locally is traditionally what people all over the world have practiced. It is only recently that we have been able to ship foods around the world at any time of the year. Cooking with seasonal foods encourages a healthy relationship with nature and life itself.

An Affordable Budget

I always strive to get the highest quality food while at the same time keeping the cost affordable. We instinctively know that smaller amounts of nutritious food are much healthier than large amounts of “empty” food with no life. I base my menus on whole foods, which are cheaper to produce than processed, refined foods. Although many organically or biodynamically grown foods are more expensive than conventional foods, I do not mind paying a little more for higher quality food. I gladly place my money in the hands of farmers who care for the health of the earth and of humanity. Buying locally ensures a minimum of shipping and packaging, since food does not have to be transported long distances across the country. I like to support a healthier local economy where the funds stay in the community. In the long run, buying high quality whole foods locally seems to be more affordable and sustaining for everyone.

Eating a diet of wholesome foods encourages a wholesome relationship with the world we live in. This is perhaps the most important aspect of healthy nutrition for children. Whole foods ensure superior quality and at the same time nourish respect and appreciation for the mystery of life. Every single time I cut an apple around the middle so that a star appears, a sigh of wonder and awe permeates the whole kindergarten. Inwardly we marvel at the wisdom that created this magnificent fruit. Small gestures like this completely change our relationship with the world and create the deepest reverence for all life.

When working in the kitchen or nature, enter with this mood of wonder. Visit the countryside to harvest wild plants and fruits. Take your children to a farm or grow a few plants at home in the garden or in a flower box. Herbs and quick-growing lettuces do well in a sunny windowsill. Whenever I plant a seed in the ground I am in awe of the plant cycle that I experience: the transformation from seed to leaf to bud, blossom, fruit, and back to seed. I am amazed that a sunflower seed blossoms within weeks into a sunflower, greeting the sun on its journey across the sky. Only a sunflower will grow from that seed, not a squash or anything else! What a miracle! My assistance in this process is humble. I nurture the plant with rich compost and make sure it has water. Then I watch the plant with the utmost interest and attention. When it is time to harvest, it is with the deepest respect and appreciation that I reach out in joy to pick the food.

Rhythm

We live in a world of constant changes. Day transforms into night and summer into winter. Every morning a new day is birthed and every evening it dies away for the night to be born. The moon becomes full, wanes, and disappears for three days before it reappears anew. The seasons flow into each other, each giving way to the next. Blessed with these changes, no two days are alike.

As human beings we are intimately connected with these rhythms. Rhythm is strengthening and very essential for the development of a healthy life no matter what age we are. Young children thrive and feel safe when the world around them flows rhythmically and is predictable. Every day at school we eat our lunch and our snack at the same times. We have the same “meal rituals”: lighting a candle and

singing a grace. A healthy rhythm of sound sleep, various nourishing activities, and wholesome meals is a gift for any child.

Nourishing Activities

Another important aspect of healthy nourishment for children is immersing them in nourishing activities. It is wonderful for children if they can participate in family and domestic activities like gardening, cooking, and setting the table. In addition, when children are responsible for age-appropriate chores they develop a sense of purpose in the world. Oral storytelling, painting, drawing, modeling, music making, imaginative play, and other artistic activities nourish active inner creativity, healthy social skills, complete brain development, and strong bodily coordination, as well as self-motivation and confidence. When children are allowed to play outdoors they exercise, climb, run, jump, walk, and explore the changing world on their own accord. Besides enriching their whole being, these activities also promote a strong appetite and sound digestion.

Developing a Taste for Natural Foods

It is a gift for children if they can develop a taste for natural foods. It may take some time to change old habits. For some of the new children at our kindergarten many of the dishes we serve seem foreign in the beginning. After an active morning outside climbing trees, running in the field, and digging in the ground, the appetite is high. Almost everything tastes great when the children are really hungry. When children also are involved in some of the processes of growing and preparing food they are much more likely to appreciate the meal in front of them with joy. Most often they will try anything that they helped prepare. We always ask that the children eat a “polite bite” so that they have a chance to cultivate a liking for new flavors and textures. But the most supportive element, I think, to help children learn to like new foods is when their friends or family around the table eat the meal with the greatest delight.

Simplicity

Children delight in simple, beautiful meals. Younger children most often prefer a little piece of broccoli, perhaps with a light dressing and a beautifully cut orange carrot flower, over an exotic vegetable pate. Of course older children, especially in the teenage years, desire a lot more zest and creativity in cooking as well as in their lives in general. A simple, beautifully prepared meal allows our senses to feast on a variety of colors, textures, flavors, and aromas and is an important aspect of making nutritious foods.

The Mood in Which We Eat

Another characteristic of healthy nutrition is the atmosphere within which the meal is shared. When the mood is warm and light-filled we can fully digest the meal. A calm, joyous feeling around the table encourages respect for one another and for nature from which we receive our food. Children grow and develop healthily in a relaxed, safe, and loving environment.

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