



THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD NUTRITION IN CHILDHOOD

Nutrition plays a critical role in child health and development. Better nutrition is linked to stronger immune systems, lower risk of non-communicable diseases, higher school attendance rates and improved academic performance. In turn, there are many factors that affect child nutrition and eating habits.

Some factors affecting child nutrition



On the one hand, poor dietary habits and nutrition are linked to overweight, obesity and malnutrition. On the other, good nutrition and healthy eating habits at a young age can influence health habits in adulthood. A healthy approach to and relationship with food can influence a person's mental and emotional health, lifetime income and food tendencies.

FOOD SECURITY & CHILD NUTRITION

Food security depends on factors including access, availability, utilisation and stability over time, and is related to different factors such as poverty and social context. Food security plays an important part in child nutrition and can influence children's social and emotional outcomes and performance at school. Its importance is recognised in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through Sustainable Development Goal 2.



An estimated 7.5% of the OECD population experienced food insecurity moderately, and an average of 0.5% to 13% severely between 2018 and 2020.



Food insecurity is correlated with higher rates of tardiness, absenteeism, hyperactivity and inattention in school (Shankar, Chung and Frank, 2017).



INEQUALITIES IN FOOD SECURITY



Children from affluent families are more likely to engage in healthy behaviours such as eating breakfast and consuming fruits and vegetables daily than children from lower socio-economic status households.



There seem to be differences between how food insecurity affects girls and boys. On average, around OECD countries, girls who transitioned from a food secure household to a food insecure household were more likely to have poor reading performance than boys in a similar situation.

FOOD NOTE: OBESITY

The high rates of obesity and malnutrition in children highlight the importance of a healthy diet. In this regard, the growing presence of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) in children's diets should be noted as their consumption has been associated with poorer health outcomes.



- Lower quality diets high in UPFs tend to be more affordable and more often adopted by people from lower socio-economic status backgrounds. Although some nutrient dense foods are available at a low cost, both palatability and acceptability influence their purchase by low-income consumers.

• **Other factors linked to obesity include:**



Mindless eating



Increased consumption of soft drinks, fast food and other high-calorie snacks



Targeted advertising and marketing of unhealthy foods



Limited physical activity

FACTORS AFFECTING EATING HABITS

Children's environments and social settings play a role in their food knowledge, habits and consumption. Some of these factors include:

Parents and family



Parents' abilities to buy and cook healthy foods influence children's eating habits as they affect food choices at home. For example, a lack of parental time to cook healthy meals is related to consumption of pre-prepared or processed foods. Parents' eating habits can also set a precedent for children's food preferences, highlighting the value of healthy role modelling.

Food exposure



Repeated exposure to unfamiliar foods can promote consumption and liking of previously rejected food, which may encourage healthy food choices in children. However, the opportunity cost of rejected and wasted foods is high, especially for lower socio-economic status households. In such cases, resorting to more palatable, "safe" foods like UPFs may be more likely.

Food environments



Children's environments can affect their views on food and food consumption. While not having access to a variety of healthy foods at home will affect a child's food choices, factors like food marketing and availability of healthy options at schools also play a large part in their nutrition and eating habits. Changes as small as the placement of fruits and vegetables at a school canteen can have a powerful impact on the foods a child chooses to eat.




FOOD NOTE: ALIMENTO PARA TODOS / Mexico

Alimento para Todos (APT) is an urban food bank in Mexico City that provides food assistance to children and their families. Initially working to close the weekend meal gap during the school year, APT created the Backpack Programme. This programme provided backpacks filled with sufficient nutritious food to provide a child and their family members with approximately four meals every weekend during the school year.

In addition to food assistance, APT provides nutritional and health assessments for children in the programme and training for community members on relevant topics such as nutrition, hygiene, food preparation and physical activity.

EXAMPLES OF FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

Education systems can play an important role in addressing food insecurity and health outcomes related to diet and nutrition. Many OECD countries have implemented practices and policies in schools to improve child health, nutrition and well-being. Examples include:

	School meal programmes (SMPs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal SMPs (Finland, Sweden) • Needs-based SMPs (Ireland) • Needs-based free breakfast programmes (Canada, France)
	Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating nutrition studies in health education and other relevant areas of the curriculum (Canada, Ireland, Japan)
	Partnerships / multi-sectoral approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership with the food industry in developing school food policies (Flemish Community of Belgium) • Targeted information for parents, caregivers, educators, youth workers and health professionals (Scotland, UK)

FOOD NOTE: BENEFITS OF SMPs

Although there are many ways education systems can support child nutrition and healthy eating, SMPs are a common policy approach to combat food insecurity and outcomes such as overweight, obesity and malnutrition. SMPs have proven themselves to benefit children in different ways, in the short and long term. These benefits include:



1. Food security

Universal SMPs are related to improvements in child food security and academic performance



2. Lifetime income

Policies promoting health and nutrition at a young age offer an opportunity to minimise health challenges during childhood and economic gaps in adulthood



3. Environment

SMPs can teach children about the consequences of food waste and establish processes to reduce food waste from school canteens

KEY READINGS

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- Shankar, P., R. Chung and D. Frank (2017), "Association of Food Insecurity with Children's Behavioral, Emotional, and Academic Outcomes: A Systematic Review", *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, Vol. 38/2, pp. 135-150, <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000000383>
- The Global FoodBanking Network (2020), *A View from the field: Healthy nations start with healthy children*.