

HEAD: Sweet Dreams: No Sugar Added

How to cut down the sugar in your child's diet

By Erik Fisher, Ph.D.

You know the phrase "sweets for the sweet." Does the saying apply to you and your kids? It probably does, and probably more than you think. Refined sugar and other artificial sweeteners are items that have infiltrated our diet, and continue to be added in almost any number of foods, whether we realize it or not. It has also been joked about with some seriousness that sugar is more difficult to quit than many illegal drugs. From early ages, parents and other adults offer kids candy, ice cream, cakes, artificially sweetened cereals, fruit Roll-Ups, gum, and many other items that are saturated with sugar. As a matter of fact, after our two-year-old daughter finished a ballet lesson, her teacher handed out suckers to every kid in the class. What amazed my wife more than just handing out the suckers was that the teacher did not even ask any of the parents if they were okay with her giving out suckers. It was just accepted that all of the kids could have one.

When it comes to your child's sugar consumption, here is what a parent should consider: early eating options often develop into later eating preferences. Essentially, if you provide certain types of foods or flavors in your children's food when they're younger, they are more likely to develop a taste for those foods in their adulthood. Just like our behaviors and language skills, our food preferences are fostered from birth.

So what about sugar? In our diet, sugar adds a variety of tastes to many different types of food. Sugar tastes "mmm-mmm" good to most of us. We often accept that many of the flavors of our foods are natural, but if you look at the ingredients in everything from tomato sauce to dried fruit, you'll find that sugar has been added to these items. Sugar quickly jump starts our metabolism and can add a quick

burst of energy, but then the body requires more sugar after the body has metabolized the glucose. It is thought that our body can become dependent on these “ups” to some degree, and therefore crave more sugar. As such, there is a preponderance of research out there pointing to the negative impact sugar has on our bodies, especially in large quantities. Refined sugar is something that we know our kids do not need to survive, and there are many other healthy alternatives for pleasurable treats.

As a psychologist, I see a number of kids and adults with different dietary issues. I have seen children with allergies, more accurately an intolerance to sugar who crave it and hoard it. The impact of the intolerance is often an increase in aggressive and impulsive behavior. Even very small amounts can result in significant changes in behavior. I have observed that it can take roughly 30 days for the body to remove sugar from the system, as evidenced by continued erratic behavior, even though it has such a short direct impact of about 30 minutes to one hour. I have also seen the seeming dependence on sugar that kids and adults develop. Whether it is weight concerns, diabetes, or even issues with artificial sweeteners and their effect on the brain, the things we sweeten food with do have an impact on us and our children.

But rather than controlling what your kids eat, you can take steps to manage it healthfully. So, how do you decrease sugar in your child’s diet? Here are some tips my wife and I use with our own child at home.

1. Read the labels on the foods that your kids are eating. Even baby foods can have added sugar.
2. **Offer water instead of juice.** Sometimes doctors will recommend giving juice to add calories. Talk to your pediatrician about the options. You can flavor it with a little lemon if you like. If you do give your child juice, dilute it by 50% or more with water. It still tastes good, and your kids will become accustomed to it.

3. **Try frozen fruit.** There are lots of yummy options, such as blueberries, raspberries, peaches, etc. These frozen fruits often do not have any added sugar and they are very healthy for your kids. Our daughter loves them, and often requests them with her breakfast.

4. **Make smoothies with your kids** using frozen fruit, milk, and unsweetened yogurt. I started making smoothies for my daughter when she was eight months old, and she asks for them to this day. Feed your kids raisins, craisins, “blaisins” (dried blueberries), or other dried fruits, but check for sugar content when buying them. My wife and I bought dried mangoes for our daughter only to find that they were covered with sugar when we opened them up. We simply wash the dried mangoes before we give them to her.

5. **For candy-laden holidays, go au naturel.** Try making homemade dried fruit roll ups with no added sugar instead of Christmas and Valentine’s cookies, and use cookie cutters to make it fun. For Easter, fill the plastic Easter eggs with dried fruits or other healthy items. Kids love to find the eggs, which is often the more fun anyway than the treat inside. If you can’t say no to chocolate, a fantastic substitute for is carob, with a rich malt flavor not found in most chocolates.

6. **Have healthy snacks on-the-ready .** Instead of candies or even fruit, bring vegetables or nuts along with you to feed your kids in the car. Carrots, celery, and other portable vegetables, as well as peanuts, sunflower seeds, and almonds are easy to bring along. When our daughter was teething, she enjoyed eating a carrot even if it took her 30 minutes to eat it. Just remember to be careful and monitor them while they are eating it when they are very young.

7. **Rethink their PB&J.** Use organic or natural peanut butters, or those made from other nuts such as almonds. Avoid introducing them early on to sugar-packed jelly.

8. **Ditch the syrup.** Don't add syrup to pancakes. Leave them plain. You may be surprised when they don't know the difference. If you like, add fresh fruit or heated fruit instead. For ourselves and for our daughter, we heat up strawberries, blackberries, blueberries, and raspberries and mash them up while they are heating. This makes a healthy syrup-like sauce that tastes great on pancakes and many other desserts and/or ice cream if you want to cheat a little. Another breakfast no-no: feeding your kids sweetened cereal.

9. **Are they getting an eyeful?** If you monitor what your child watches on TV, then he or she doesn't have to watch the commercials. If they don't watch the commercials, they won't see some of the ads for the cereals or other sweetened items, and they are less of a nagging, sugary presence.

10. **Talk the talk.** Most importantly, monitor what you eat and drink, and be a strong, healthy model to your kids. While your kids might not eat everything that you eat, they do follow your lead. It's never too late for you to change your eating habits.

If other parents make comments about how you manage your kids' food, understand that they may have their own issues to address. Don't feel like you are depriving your kids from the better things in life. Diabetes, weight problems, and other side effects of sugar over-consumption are not "the better things" by any means! Your concern, after all, is your child's health, and the habits that they are developing starting now. Help them begin good habits early on, and they will likely last for a lifetime.

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