

Children's Diet and Nutrition from a Chinese Medicine Perspective

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Over the 21st century, several shifts have taken place, which have contributed to the move away from family-based models to more capitalist structures and values. The result being that both parents in a household often work and child-care has become a necessity. This change has had a major impact, not only on lifestyle, but also on the production, supply, quality and consumption of food for communities and their children. Major health concerns have arisen due to the increased stress; need for convenience; the reliance on processed and fast foods / lack of nutritious food consumed; food insecurity and inequality; and the lack of time for meal preparation and consumption. In the current food landscape, the built-in innate wisdom of traditional medicine systems could offer insights on how to bring back elements of balance and proper nourishment.

This paper aims specifically to create awareness with regards to the link between children's nutrition, digestion and illness. It does not however cover infantile nutrition, as infants develop very rapidly and require nutrition tailored to their stage of development. The focus in this text, is on providing concrete nutritional and dietary advice from a Chinese medicine (CM) perspective, rather than concentrating on the related pathology. Despite the widespread use of Chinese medicine globally, children's nutrition is a topic that is an underutilised resource. In an age where children's obesity, pathology and mental health / behavioural issues have increased steadily over the last 50 years, most parents could reap substantial benefits by being coached on the topic and understanding that their child has specific individual nutritional needs, which are mostly incongruent with cultural and social norms. Aside from the difficulties of getting children to eat or eat the right foods, diet and how it can be regulated to maintain health is poorly understood. Many western dietary ideas are mostly not compatible with Chinese medicine ideas and furthermore not at all suitable for children. Furthermore, schools and daycares are from a Chinese medicine perspective vastly missing the mark, when it comes to offering a child-friendly diets.

In comparison to adults, children are especially susceptible to digestive complaints as their organs are insufficient, imperfect and fragile. They are 'ChunYang' (pure Yang), have young Yin (organs and five substances) and young Yang (delicate function of the ZangFu organs). As a result of the relative imbalance of Yin to Yang, children easily tend towards vacuity and easily tend towards repletion, easily suffer from cold and easily suffer from heat'. They will manifest quickly with digestive complaints or lack of appetite, when ill, as the transformation and transportation of the Spleen are

easily affected. They can quickly suffer from severe symptoms, but also recover very quickly. Poor nutrition and bad diet, directly weakens the function of and congests the main digestive organs, the Stomach and the Spleen. The functions of transformation, ascending & descending become disturbed, impacting the production and transportation of Qi, Fluids and Blood. Deficiency patterns that underly such pathology include Spleen Qi deficiency; Spleen and Lung Qi deficiency; Stomach Fluids / Yin deficiency; Spleen Qi and Blood deficiency; and Spleen & Kidney vacuity. Possible replete patterns that may present include food stagnation; heat patterns (accentuated by Fluid imbalance or Yin deficiency); cold patterns (accentuated by Fluid imbalance or Yang deficiency), Liver and Heart heat; Stomach and Heart heat. It is also possible for mixed vacuity and replete conditions to co-exist, including Spleen Qi deficiency and damp; and Spleen and Lung Qi deficiency with Phlegm cold / heat. Some of the symptoms associated with the above patterns include abdominal pain, vomiting, constipation; diarrhea; nutritional deficiencies; malnutrition, ENT ailments, coughing, food intolerances; eczema; obesity; anemia; allergies; fever; and sleep disturbances. Long-term consequences may also include stunted growth; poor cognitive; motor and behavioural capacity. Diet also plays an important role in syndromes such as ADD, ADHD and autism. As the Spleen and Stomach are the root of our post heaven Qi, long-term digestive ailments set the stage for other diseases to set in.

From a Chinese medicine perspective, there are some general rules that help protect the health of the Stomach and Spleen. That being said, CM believes that in order to maintain health, each individual requires a diet which is compatible with their constitution / body type and existing health issues. ShuWenZangQiFaShi (Plain Questions on ZangFu and time effect) states:

- Eating too sweet, may cause malnutrition.
- Eating too sour, damages the will power.
- Eating too bitter, consumes the Spirit.
- Eating too salty, closes the Qi.
- Eating too greasy, produces phlegm.
- Eating too pungent, injures the Lungs.

Under normal health conditions, the five element diet is a standard recommendation to support a child's nutritional needs and growth. It prescribes high quality foods consumed in an appropriate and balanced manner. The five colours and flavours, balancing the thermal qualities of food and eating seasonally form part of this nutritional system. This diet supports, protects and optimizes the

relationship between the 5 organs. It mitigates overconsumption / underconsumption of certain food groups and the related health problems. This is especially important as having weak digestive capacity, overconsuming / underconsuming certain foods can quickly result in digestive complaints. Specifically, overeating of thermally cooling foods (raw foods and fruits), very rich foods (too much protein, creams or oils), sweet foods, refined foods and simple carbohydrates, fruit juices, smoothies; and dairy products can result in a weakened Spleen function and the accumulation of Damp. All food groups including fats and proteins are essential to support a child's optimal growth. It is mostly the quantity consumed, which determines the benefit / harm. As children generally have a weaker digestive capability, simple and easily digestible foods, in small portions, in line with the five element theory is recommended. Mild tasting foods with little spicing or salt is recommended for children, such as not to overwhelm / corrupt their taste buds and organ function. Spicy food is in general not recommended for children as the organs are fragile and can easily tend to heat.

Aside from the quality of food, it is also important to focus on the behaviour associated with consuming food. To cater for children's Yang nature and increased energy needs, food should be offered at regular intervals. A stable eating plan can keep blood sugars constant and help caregivers avoid the related behavioural meltdowns. Having a regular eating plan, not only helps the body anticipate its next meal, but also avoids the issues with hunger attacks / snacking / over-feeding (which can lead to food stagnation in small children). This being said, children's energy needs are mostly quite variable and thus caregivers should remain flexible to their needs. Keeping healthy snacks readily available is advised to avoid moments of extreme hunger. Frequently, children present with periods of reduced appetite. This is quite normal and may be related to their emotional state, acute illness or dysregulated digestion (ie. constipation). For short periods of a couple of days, the food intake should be decreased until the child's appetite returns. If children present with longer periods of decreased appetite, a check-up with a physician is advised. Similarly, periods of increased activity and appetite are to be expected and should be checked with a physician, if the child's appetite is extreme, if the child wants to eat at odd hours or they want to eat strange things (parasitic infection should be considered).

Training good eating habits and customs consistently from an early age, ensures that children are happy and cooperative at meal times. If a child feels pressurised or emotional, they may lose their appetite. A general list of recommendations include:

- Not letting a child choose what they eat, such as too 'broaden their palette'.
(Generally speaking, most children tend to over-enjoy food from the earth element and avoid or eat less from the other groups of the five element nutrition). This recommendation has to be followed with care though, as their should also be some room for the child to develop a 'gut feeling' about what foods are suitable for them or not. By watching their behaviour carefully, we may be able to discern between dislike of foods and intolerance of foods.
- Not putting too much food on the plate, as this may be off putting to some children. A child should be encouraged to finish what is on their plate. Thereafter they can always be offered more food if necessary.
- Drinking during meals should not be encouraged as it fills the Stomach and dilutes the stomach acid. In general, sugary

soft drinks should be avoided and children should be offered water on a regular basis, as they don't always voice that they are thirsty.

- Children eat with their eyes, thus it is essential to make food look attractive and possibly even 'sneak in' foods that they may not find attractive.
- Adequate movement outdoors makes children robust and improves their appetite.
- During the colder months, it is important to ensure that children are well clothed and that their abdomens are not exposed. Exposing the abdomen to cold may lead to problems of abdominal pain and diarrhea.

It is a deep wish of the author that on a micro-level, further effort is invested in creating more awareness with regards to providing adequate nutrition for children, as well as in promoting the appropriate education of parents and care-givers. This topic goes hand-in-hand with providing coaching and supportive facilities and structures for those looking after children. On a macro-level, collaboration needs to be secured to ensure the sustainable production and supply of high quality, ethically priced and distributed food options for communities [1,2].

References

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