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Eating right

Parents play a key role in shaping their children's eating habits.

By **ASSOC PROF DR NORIMAH A. KARIM** and **DR ZAWIAH HASHIM**

DO ANY of these scenarios seem familiar to you?
Sweet tooth Kasim

Seven-year-old Kasim is overweight for his age. Whenever he gets hungry in between meals, he indulges in chocolates and sweet snacks. Now that he's in primary school, his parents are concerned as they are unable to stop him from overindulging in unhealthy snacks in the school canteen.

Weight-conscious Sara

Sara's mum wakes her up every morning just 20 minutes before the school bell rings. The 12-year-old is always in a rush and ends up skipping breakfast. But Sara thinks it is all right; she wants to be skinny as she is starting to be conscious of her appearance.

Busy little Kumar

Kumar, 10, lacks exercise as he's always on a tight schedule. To start preparing for his UPSR exams, his parents have enrolled him in numerous tuition classes after school. To "switch off", Kumar spends his free time playing computer games.

These are problems commonly experienced by many children and their parents. When this happens, mealtimes can turn unpleasant.

Parenting them to eat

As parents, you can help inculcate good eating habits in your children. You are the one who decides what to cook and serve your family, so you are the best person to set the principles of healthy eating.

Once your child has cultivated healthy eating habits, you need not worry about him making the wrong food choices.

Nutritional problems

The majority of Malaysian children have adequate nutrition. However, a significant proportion of our children may be malnourished. They are either not getting enough calories and nutrients or getting way too much. According to the nationwide National Health and Morbidity Survey III, 2006, one out of every five of our children are malnourished in terms of unsatisfactory weight and height.

Over-nutrition

The highest number of overweight children

were those between seven and 13 years old. Over-nourished children tend to become overweight adults. Studies show that this could lead to diabetes and hypertension later in life. Being overweight or obese can also give children a poor body image and low self-esteem.

Under-nutrition

Children are undernourished when they do not get sufficient energy from food, which may result in lack of various important nutrients. Underweight children are more susceptible to infections and often do not achieve their full growth potential.

Malnourished

The main reason for malnutrition is inappropriate dietary pattern. This arises from lack of nutrition knowledge, as well as lack of attention and care on the part of parents.

A study conducted by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia two years ago on 9,000 primary schoolchildren aged 7-12, showed that children in Malaysia have unhealthy eating habits and lack of physical activity.

The study also revealed the following:

> *Skipping breakfast*

One in three primary schoolchildren skip breakfast. When your child skips the most important meal of the day, he does not get the fuel he needs to keep him alert in class.

> *Unhealthy snacking*

Four out of every 10 primary schoolchildren snacked everyday. Unhealthy snacking habits, which range from snacking too close to mealtimes to snacking on high-calorie but low-nutrient foods like french fries, chocolates and sweets, can spoil your child's appetite for healthy, regular meals.

> *Sedentary lifestyle and lack of physical activity*

Two out of every five primary schoolchildren are inactive. Children are spending more time on sedentary activities such as watching

television, reading, and playing computer or electronic games.

Children should be encouraged to be physically active to help promote physical and mental development.

A healthy head start

If your child faces an eating problem, the first step is to identify the problem. Are they skipping breakfast? Not getting enough physical activity or snacking frequently? Once you've identified the cause, you can take the appropriate steps to address the problem.

This is why it is important for parents to take charge of their children's eating habits.

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Learn the basics of good nutrition and pass on this knowledge to your children.

Teach your children to select foods wisely, adopt healthy eating habits and cultivate an active lifestyle from young.

■ *Learn more about bringing up healthy children through the various educational materials and activities of Nutrition Month Malaysia 2010 from www.nutriweb.org.my. Do join in the fun NMM '10 Carnival at the Mid Valley Exhibition Centre on May 15 and 16, from 10am onwards. This article is brought to you by Nutrition*

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