



Children discover the Nature Principle

» As children move through the early stages of development, providing them with the most nutritious whole foods available is essential to their long term growth and development. Getting preschoolers and older children to eat well however, is often easier said than done and parents usually find that they have less control over their child's eating habits as they start to grow. But parents can take steps to ensure that good nutritional habits are established in early childhood and stay with kids as they grow. By **Monica Waters**.

The Development of a Consumer

Parents understandably find it difficult to compete against the impact of popular cartoon characters, competitions, promotions, plastic toys and all the marketing and promotional trappings of the junk food sold to kids in bright, exciting-looking fast food restaurants. Trips to the supermarket can also turn into a nightmare, thanks to the chocolates, sweets and snacks being artfully positioned at child-height.

Marketers have identified children as providing a very lucrative demographic. They know the power children can wield over their parents' buying behaviour and decisions.

Did you know that advertising executives often enlist the services of child psychologists to assist them in developing campaigns targeting children? According to the CEO of Prism Communications, "they aren't children so much as what I like to call 'evolving consumers'" (Ontario Teacher's Federation, USA).

Market research indicates that even children as young as two years old can distinguish the differences between food brands (Media Awareness Network, CA).

In the past decade, industry spending on the advertising of junk food has exploded. On average, children are now exposed to anything up to 11 television advertisements for foods of low nutritional value every single

day (Free TV Australia 2005).

Once exposed to the world of over-processed, cleverly marketed convenience foods, children almost always develop fussy eating habits and the sale of nutritionally-poor foods in school canteens only serves to further undermine parents efforts to feed their children well.

Teaching kids about food labels and advertising claims

Children are interested in their own health and growth and their ability to understand nutritional concepts from an early age should not be underestimated. What's cool at school is also often of much greater interest to children than what's cool nationally.

We recently put this theory to the test when introducing a new healthy school community program aimed at teaching primary school aged children about the principles of nutrition, organics and food labeling. We were amazed with the results.

In July 2007 Whole Kids was approached by a school parent who had received government funding, to develop a healthy school community program that was implemented over a six week period.

As part of the program children learned the basics of food labeling and packaging

in a practical and interactive environment, which they also put into practice during visits to the supermarket.

Since then Whole Kids has also conducted seminars with a number of primary schools across Victoria, introducing children to the concept of organics and the Nature Principle, developed by nutritionist Sherry Strong.

According to the Nature Principle 'nature tells us what to eat and in the quantities to eat it in, by how easily (and when) it is obtained in nature' (Sherry Strong, 2007).

The children have really taken to this concept and we have found this a great way to help them make the connection between the food they consume and where it comes from.

As part of the program, children are asked to compare the ingredient lists of conventional and organic products and to think about what's involved in making those products.

We have been amazed at the ability of small children to grasp concepts of organics and to actively seek out products that are low in fat, sugar and are least processed alternatives, along with their ability to distinguish between advertising claims. One child even wanted to know whether organic sultanas were dried under factory lights or by the sun, naturally!

Parents and teachers have also been delighted with the results, with one parent

commenting that her children are making healthier choices, reading labels and even wanting to help with the weekly shopping.

Children are constantly under pressure from marketers and advertisers and this is not likely to change any time soon. By teaching children from a very early age about the nutritional content of different foods, and explaining to them about what the advertisements are trying to make them do, we can combat this.

By involving children in shopping and in the cooking and preparation of food, teaching them the difference between healthy food and junk food, showing them how to read labels, which ingredients to look for and which ones to avoid, we are giving them the tools they need to distinguish between claims so that they can make healthier choices for themselves. <<<<

Monica Waters has actively participated in the health industry for over ten years, providing advice to new mothers and busy parents on health and nutrition. Monica's experience working closely with parents and children has given her unique insights into raising healthy, active children by establishing healthy eating habits in early childhood. Monica is also co-founder of Whole Kids, Australia's first range of fully certified organic snacks for children.

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