



Sweet enough?

Should we be advising parents to stop serving fruit juice and milk to their children to keep their sugar intake down? A year ago this question would have seemed completely ridiculous and unworthy of editorial space in *Teach Nursery*. However, looking at our recent postbag at Grub4life, it's clear there's a lot of confusion about sugar.

So far 2014 has been the year of the sugar wars! Wherever you turn, the white stuff has been demonised. Foods containing sugar have featured in media headlines and blamed for the UK's obesity problem. But, I believe that the media have missed the point in an effort to make 'sexy' headlines. We have inadvertently forgotten to distinguish good sugar from bad. So, allow me to put the record straight.

Firstly, a quick reminder: sugar is part of the carbohydrate group of nutrients; the main role of carbs in the body is to provide energy in the form of glucose or blood sugar. Complex carbohydrates, like bread, potatoes, rice and pasta, eventually break down to blood sugar through digestion and provide a drip feed of energy to the body. Simple sugars, like table sugar, fructose in fruit and lactose in milk, produce blood sugar more quickly when they are digested.

If blood sugar is not needed at the time for energy, it's turned into fat. It's a fairly logical jump to realise, therefore, that eating too much sugar makes you fat. Being overweight

in turn increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Right now about one in five children starts primary school already overweight, rising to one in three by the time they leave. Clearly sugar is involved in obesity in one way or another.

Good & bad sugars

So sugar comes as complex or simple carbohydrates. But, there's another vitally important distinguishing factor between sugars: it also comes as *naturally occurring sugar* and *added sugar*.

Naturally occurring sugars are found in fruits, vegetables and milk, along with a whole host of other nutrients, including vitamins, minerals, protein, essential fats and fibre.

Added sugars are found predominantly in soft drinks, biscuits, cakes and confectionery and offer no nutritional value at all. It's added because we like the taste of it, and if we like the taste we are likely to buy more.

Young children are not born with a preference for very sweet foods and drinks.

How much sugar should we be giving our children, and what separates that which is naturally occurring from that added artificially?

Nigel Denby offers some advice...

It is we adults who teach them to like these foods. So, to beat the obesity trends, should we just ban children from eating anything that tastes sweet? Be my guest if you want to try!

What we need to do is teach children how to differentiate less healthy foods and drinks with lots of added sugar from those healthy foods that contain natural sugars. We also need to teach children how to include sweet treats in their diets appropriately, without overdoing them.

How much is healthy?

At the moment, the recommendation is that 11 per cent of calories can come from added sugars each day. For a 1-4-year-old that's around 38g of sugar or 9 ½ teaspoons. Most children are eating more than that and it's easy to see why. A regular can of cola contains around 7 teaspoons of sugar alone!

It would be so much easier if food labels actually said whether sugar was naturally occurring or added, and there is pressure growing for this to change. In the meantime, as a general rule of thumb, if a food is manufactured, processed or in a packet, you can assume some or all of it contains added

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NIGEL DENBY, GRUB4LIFE

sugar. If it's been packed by nature then it's natural sugar. In the table below you'll find a range of foods and drinks with their sugar content per 100g, along with an indication as to whether this sugar is natural or added.

Sugar contributes to weight gain, but it also poses another problem for children. Tooth decay is caused by excess sugar and poor dental hygiene. This calls into question the benefits, and highlights the dangers, of dried fruit and fruit juice. Just think about eating a handful of raisins – they are sticky; it's not that dissimilar to eating a toffee. Dried fruit sticks to the teeth and this means an increase in the contact time between the teeth and the sugar. So, in a nursery setting, dried fruit should only be served as part of a main meal like a curry, or as part of a dessert like rice pudding, not as a snack.

And, I'm afraid, fruit juice is also a problem for children. It has a potent combination of sugar and acid (which increases once the fruit is juiced), making it a perfect agent for destroying tooth enamel and encouraging dental decay. It's also really easy to drink a lot of fruit juice. One small glass (about 200ml) of fruit juice can be counted only once towards a child's five-a-day. Repeated glasses offer no nutritional benefits.

It's fine to offer a glass of juice with breakfast, but then move children on to either diluted juice (ratio 50:50) or plain water. As the nutritional benefits of fruit juice are delivered in one glass, after that it's really only adding excess sugar and calories.

Healthy sugar?

Honey, maple syrup and brown sugar are all often perceived as being healthier than white table sugar. Unfortunately, they're not.

SUGAR IN FOOD

FOOD/DRINK	SUGAR PER 100G	NATURAL OR ADDED SUGAR
Apple	11g	Natural
Apple juice	10g	Natural
Battenberg cake	34g	Added
Canned peaches in syrup	14g	Natural + added
Canned peaches in natural juice	9g	Natural
Chocolate digestive	28.5g	Added
Fruit yoghurt	18g	Natural + added
Milkshake, ready made	13g	Natural + added
Orange squash, undiluted	29g	Added
Plain digestive	13g	Added
Raisins	69g	Natural
Stewed plums (without sugar)	7g	Natural
Tomato ketchup	23g	Added
Whole milk	5g	Natural



Your body treats them in exactly the same way, they contain the same number of calories and in excess are just as harmful, so don't be duped.

A bit of what you fancy...

A child's diet primarily needs to fuel growth and development, and children have comparatively higher nutritional needs than adults. They have tiny tummies, so it's easy for them to miss out on the nutrients they need. They simply don't have room for empty calories from an excess of sugary foods and drinks.

At the same time, children should enjoy cakes, biscuits and treats. At Grub4life we actively encourage the serving of home-made puddings and desserts on our nursery menus because they are useful ways of delivering vitamins and minerals – calcium through milk and protein through eggs, for example. These appear alongside fresh fruit and yoghurts to offer a balanced diet throughout the week.

Over the years we've adapted hundreds of recipes to contain less sugar. Sweet treats should be just that – treats that are occasional additions to a well-balanced diet; they shouldn't be major contributors to the diet.

SETTING LIMITS

TO KEEP A LID ON THE SUGAR YOUR NURSERY'S CHILDREN EAT, USE THESE SIMPLE TIPS TO PLAN MENUS AND ADVISE PARENTS...

- 1** Never use sweet foods as rewards or 'bribes' for good behaviour, and don't serve them as regular snacks.
- 2** Keep confectionery for a once-a-week treat.
- 3** Avoid all sugary drinks; if children have fruit juice, stick to one glass a day.
- 4** Serve water or milk as between-meal drinks.
- 5** Enjoy fresh fruit and serve canned fruit in natural juice rather than syrup. Only serve dried fruit as part of a meal and not as a between-meal snack.
- 6** Serve home-made desserts, puddings and simple cakes throughout the week as part of a balanced menu
- 7** Add your own stewed fruits to natural yoghurts.

findout more

To find out more about training and other support to help you plan balanced, healthy menus and recipes, contact feedback@grub4life.com