

Health concerns: Hydration

Early years practitioners have a vital role to play in keeping children hydrated and helping them to understand when it's time to have a drink, says **Sarah Scotland...**



about the author

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For children, staying hydrated is important for many reasons. Becoming dehydrated can not only decrease their energy levels but their concentration too, which in turn can affect learning and overall wellbeing. Children need to learn to recognise the symptoms of thirst, as they are not born with this knowledge; they need to realise that a dry mouth indicates that they need to have a drink, otherwise they might go for long periods without consuming any liquids.

As such, it is vital that carers who are responsible for children make fluids available (preferably water) and are aware of situations when fluids should be increased. Similarly, to encourage good habits it is important that they act as role models - so apart from cups of tea, make sure that water is the only drink that you have when around the children.

Warning signs

Young children and babies need more water than adults; their bodies are made up of 75 per cent of it (a figure more than 25 per cent greater than adults). And not only is there more water in their bodies to be maintained, they also do a very good job at getting rid of the water that they have. They have the ability to breathe faster than adults and as such lose more water through respiration, and they have a greater surface area of skin relative to their body size with which to lose water - so on a hot day when we're all maintaining our body temperature by losing water (evaporation) through the skin in order to cool the body, children are losing considerably more.

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Knowing when to give children drinks is very important; unfortunately, there are no current guidelines as to how much water should be drunk. Carers need, therefore, to recognise the signs that their charges need more fluids. Tell-tale signs include when a child has loose stools (and is therefore losing more water) and when they have a high temperature. As a rough guide, six to eight glasses should be drunk a day. This may seem like a lot, but remember that foods, especially fruit and vegetables contain water, which adds to the daily amounts consumed.

Food and drink

Babies, especially if they are being breast fed, will be getting all the fluid they need. Bottle-fed babies will be getting fluid, but may need additional cooled, boiled water - so when a baby cries, try offering them a drink. When early weaning is started, the amount of water being ingested will increase due to the foods being offered (fruit and vegetables, which are full of water).

As children get older and eat more complex foods containing protein and carbohydrates, less water will be ingested. It is important at this stage that water is provided at meal times in a cup. Fizzy drinks and fruit juice should be offered in moderation as they contain extra calories,

which are not needed and contribute to weight gain, as well as being acidic and causing dental caries. A glass of fruit juice, accounts for one of our 'five a day'; however, no more than this should be drunk unless it is watered down, as each 150ml glass contains three teaspoons of sugar. The vitamin C in fruit juice can help the iron in food be absorbed, so encourage children to drink a glass with their main meal.

A final note of caution: be careful of giving too much fluid, especially full fat milk. Not only is full fat milk full of saturated fat, which adds to weight gain, it also reduces iron absorption. Also, too much milk and water, primarily milk, fills the child up and may result in them not eating a proper meal and therefore not receiving the necessary nutrients. Milk remains, however, an important drink for children, as it provides vitamins and calcium that are vital to strong bones and teeth.

