



FUEL FOR ACTIVE BOYS

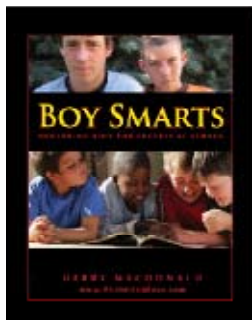
Dear Barry,

At your recent presentation in Burnaby you responded to a question about nutrition, inviting a dad to consider the effects that diet may have on his son's mood. You suggested that a diet rich in processed fats and sugary carbs could be problematic for boys with high energy.

Every day, I observe that the rambunctious boys in my classroom eat highly processed snacks and lunches—cereal bars, fruit cups, and fruit drink boxes. Rarely do I see these boys eat unprocessed fruit, vegetables or any kind of protein. When I ask them about what they had for breakfast, they usually name a sugary cereal. One boy even told me that he ate only little packages of fruit berries for breakfast.

Despite my efforts to ensure that our classroom offers engaging hands-on learning experiences, I worry that diets high in sugar and fat may be working against my students. I am interested in what you have learned about the nutrition of boys who struggle with their attention and focus. I'd like to support the parents of my students more and would appreciate anything you can offer to help me support their efforts to have healthy families.

Sheila





Dear Sheila,

Despite the abundance of food in North America, malnutrition is on the rise. In the United States 62% of teachers regularly see students who come to school hungry because they aren't getting enough to eat at home. In Canada, and especially in BC where child poverty rates are among the highest of all provinces, teachers tell me that mood follows food. They see how high sugar foods often lead to increased behaviour and emotional regulation problems, especially for boys diagnosed with ADHD.


Health care providers further indicate that our highly processed fast food diet lacks essential vitamins, nutrients, and minerals to adequately grow healthy brains. A study recently published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* by Peter Venables and Adrian Raine shows a link between early childhood malnutrition and later cognitive functioning, which in turn leads to externalizing conduct problems. Adrian Raine, co-author of the study, distills the study's findings: "Poor nutrition, characterized by zinc, iron, vitamin B and protein deficiencies, leads to low IQ, which leads to later antisocial behavior," he said.


Be Vigilant with Simple Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates are the body's most important and readily available source of energy, but not all carbohydrates are the same. The carbohydrates that contain simple sugars and highly refined grains, such as white flour and white rice are easily broken down and cause blood sugar levels to rise quickly. The complex carbohydrates found in whole grains, on the other hand, are broken down more slowly, allowing blood sugar levels to rise more gradually.

Evidence suggests that the sugar hits from simple carbohydrates can have a powerful effect on young brains. Normally, after a balanced meal, glucose from

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complex carbohydrates is released gradually into the bloodstream, and as the body releases insulin in order to help metabolize glucose, a body feels energized after taking in nutrition. Moderate amounts of glucose fuel our bodies and brains. However, when we eat too many foods that are high in simple carbohydrates a rapid spike in blood sugar and insulin levels result—we may experience that sugar crash that many of us know first-hand. As the body concentrates on processing sugar hits, energy levels plummet.

As Jamie Oliver describes in his award winning *TED* talk about childhood malnourishment, diets high in glucose and fat are more common among children living in poverty. Malnourishment, like obesity, is a nutritional deficit that disproportionately affects people in low-income households; as counter-intuitive as it sounds, an obese child may also suffer from malnutrition.



The landmark documentary, *A Place at the Table*, indicates that a diet high in saturated fats and glucose is often the most affordable for families struggling to make ends meet. In these homes sugary breakfast cereals, canned pastas, and prepared frozen foods like chicken nuggets and pizza are a mainstay. The compelling documentary shows that as the fast food industry has expanded, everyday access to wholesome vegetables and fruit has diminished, leaving geographical areas called food deserts, where access to healthful food options is restricted or non-existent. It is hard to imagine that only five decades ago chips, sugary drinks and other highly processed fast foods were a rare and expensive treat. Today, many people pressed for time and money find it much cheaper and easier to buy high glucose and fatty processed foods than fruits and vegetables.

Reduce Sugar and Increase Protein

We should all be concerned. As a counsellor and child behaviour specialist for 30 years working with diverse populations, I have seen how a diet of over processed simple carbohydrates affects young people, especially boys who struggle with regulating emotion and attention. Whenever parents consult with me about their son's unruly behaviour, I encourage them to seek medical input about two basic dietary suggestions that I believe can help rambunctious boys manage their energy: Reduce simple carbohydrates and saturated fats, and increase protein intake.

According to *Health Canada*, healthy meals and snacks should consist of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins such as beans, chicken, fish, nuts, tofu, and eggs. Children need to eat a breakfast high in protein, complex carbohydrates, and fiber—like oatmeal and a glass of milk, peanut butter or tofu spread on whole grain bread, or scrambled eggs, whole grain toast, and apple slices.



While no single food will magically boost the brain to optimal performance, different foods aid learning in different ways. Foods containing iron, such as spinach, beans or wholegrain cereal, help transport oxygen to the brain, bolstering concentration. Protein—found in meats, beans dairy, and eggs—also help alertness and therefore motivation. Foods high in B vitamins, such as enriched grains, bananas, fish and dairy products, assist the brain's memory and reduce confusion.

Beware of Artificial Additives

Research indicates that additives such as artificial sweeteners, flavours, and colours, contribute to problems with attention, mood, and behaviour. Although some challenge these findings as having limited science behind them, consider that the *European Union* now requires a warning label on food packaging that contains additives, stating: "This food may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children." When you consider how recent is the outcry against the availability of junk food in school vending machines, and that the mandated banning of junk food in school vending machines has only recently taken effect in a few provinces such as British Columbia, Ontario and Nova Scotia, it's worth noting that some governments are working harder than others to ensure children receive adequate nutrition. In France, for example, strict *Ministry of Education* school meal regulations ensure that fried food is served only once per month, ketchup once per week, and that each day children drink only water at lunch.

When many people imagine eating French food, they are often confounded by the low rates of obesity in France. After moving to northern France with her husband and her two picky eater kids, Karen Le Billon, author of *French Kids Eat Everything (and yours can too)* and visiting professor now at UBC, was astonished to discover that French children happily ate everything, there was no concept of kid food, and no snacking. "The French believe that teaching a kid to eat is just as important as, and just as time consuming as, teaching them to read. When you teach a kid to read, you teach the alphabet, then words, sit with them, read with them. The French feel that way about eating. They have a long-term view. They also don't get frustrated when there are bumps in the road. Some kids take longer to read than others, but they don't give up and say 'This kid is a picky eater, she just doesn't like broccoli.' You don't treat fear of foods as a personality trait, you treat it as a phase."

After studying French eating patterns and habits, Dr. Le Billon compiled a list of common sense food rules that French parents follow. I offer her practical guidelines for parents to consider:

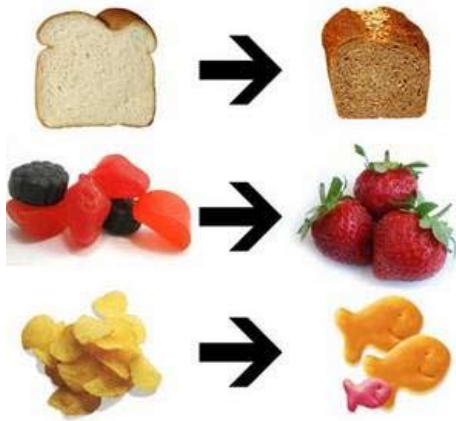


The last rule is the most important, reminding us that food is a shared pleasure to be savoured and enjoyed.

And if you're thinking—well, that's all very well for the French, but I need "fast food" for those busy workdays, take a weekend day when you can collaborate with your kids, preparing healthy soups or one-pot meals that you can freeze in portions. Kids apprenticed to the alchemy of cooking—the magic of blending flavours—will want to taste the fruits of their labour.

Bon appétit! •••

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com



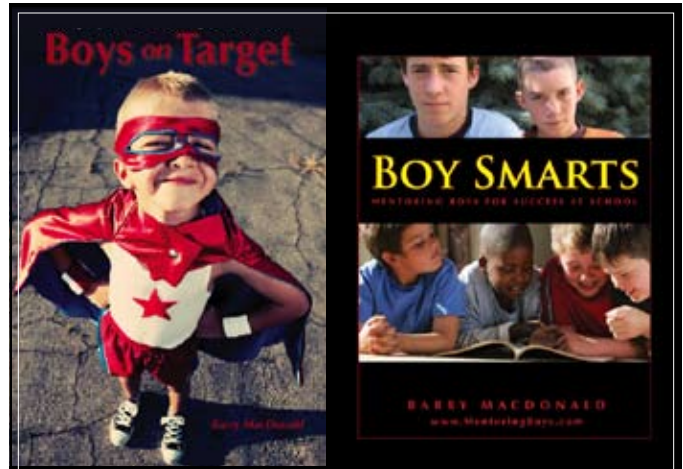
Eat Right Ontario offers the following sample lunch suggestions for children:

- Pepper strips with hummus dip, and cheese-filled pasta with tomato sauce.
- Marinated cooked tofu in a whole wheat tortilla wrap with shredded lettuce and grated carrot. Add a fruit yogurt on the side.
- Why not breakfast for lunch? Hot cereal in a thermos topped with frozen berries and sliced almonds with a cold milk or soy beverage.

As you plan snacks, think of them as a “mini meal” that includes two of the four food groups. Try these simple nutritious snack ideas:

- Whole grain crackers with a cheese stick.
- Fresh cut fruit with a yogurt dip.
- Nut-free trail mix. Combine dried cranberries, raisins, dried apricots, and apple rings with sunflower and pumpkin seeds, along with your kid’s favourite cold cereal.
- Yogurt tube and small oatmeal muffin.

CLICK HERE to view ***Eat Right Ontario’s*** weeklong sample family menu plan to inspire your planning at home.



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The challenges associated with being male vary in each community. I welcome the opportunity to work with your parents and teachers to strengthen how we collectively support boys. For details contact info@mentoringboys.com.



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