

# Four ways to make healthy eating kid-friendly

GOOD nutrition is vital to ensure that children and teenagers grow up healthy and develop well, both physically and mentally.

However, this may be difficult in a country with such a wide variety of food like Malaysia.

According to Dr Satvinder Kaur, head of the Nutrition with Wellness Programme at UCSI University Kuala Lumpur, there is a “double burden” of malnutrition faced by Malaysian children.

“Children in the country are facing issues of both under- and over-nutrition, with at least 11.9% of Malaysian children classified as obese and a 13% prevalence of under-weight children in 2015,” she said.

Speaking at SK Padang Jawa, Shah Alam, the first adopted school under Mondelez International (Malaysia)’s Joy Schools programme, Dr Satvinder shared, “A child’s environment is very important for them to cultivate healthy eating habits.

“From a young age, parents are important role models for children and must play an

active role to ensure that they are eating the right type of food.

“If children are constantly exposed to unhealthy snacks at home, they may associate these snacks as ‘comfort food’ and not want to reach for healthier alternatives like fruits.”

Since its inception in South-East Asia in 2011, Joy Schools has benefited approximately 11,500 students in 25 schools in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia.

Its activities are conducted across three core pillars of promoting nutrition education, providing access to fresh food and advocating active play.

The programme is supported in Malaysia by the Education Ministry.

Cultivating healthy eating habits doesn’t have to be hard. Here are four easy things

that parents can start doing to make healthy eating fun:

### **1. Teach them that vegetables are tasty**

Parents can incorporate vegetables into tasty foods to entice children, while also teaching them that vegetables can be tasty on their own.

Children might also be more interested in eating their fruits and vegetables if they are cut up or served in animal shapes, creating an opportunity for them (and parents) to boost their creative juices.

Besides that, ensure that children are not distracted during meal times by gadgets or media. Gradually limit and avoid screen time during meals to ensure that children can recognise what they are eating and determine their likes and dislikes.

### **2. Teach them about portion control**

In preparing a balanced diet, moderation and variety should be key. An easy way of doing this is to incorporate the Malaysian Healthy Plate concept of quarter, quarter, half. Children should have a quarter plate of rice, a quarter plate of protein-based foods (poultry, eggs, fish, legumes), and half a plate of fruits and vegetables.

Consider investing in some fun and child-friendly tableware that lets them play with their food or teach them how to prepare their own meals according to the Malaysian Healthy Plate concept.

For packed lunches, parents should focus on preparing one-dish recipes such as sandwiches, chicken or tuna wraps that are easy to prepare.

### **3. Prepare healthier versions of local favourites**

You don't have to stop serving nasi goreng or nasi lemak. By reducing the usage of oil, salt and sugar, you can immediately make the meal healthier. For example, include more vegetables or poultry/ tofu to serve up a healthier version of nasi goreng.

SK-Padang Jawa revamped their canteen menu to include healthier dishes for children, such as burgers made with tofu patties.

The revamped menu was well received by



Teach children that vegetables can be tasty too. — AFP

the children and sold out on the day of the launch.

While it may be easy to control a child's food intake at home, it can be challenging when children are exposed to foods out of the home environment.

The 2016 South East Asian Nutrition Survey found that one in 10 children ate fast food on a weekly basis.

Parents should ensure that their children know not to go overboard or encourage them to choose healthier alternatives.

### **4. Customise their meal plans as they age**

As a child grows, their preferences and nutritional needs changes as well. A good meal plan should incorporate availability, nutrient balance and adequacy while also suiting a child's preference at the time.

Keeping the kitchen stocked with healthy snacks that can be grabbed on the go, such as granola bars, also encourages children to reach for healthier "comfort food".