

# Nutrition's profound impact on child development and mental health

Research is unveiling how a well-balanced gut microbiome is linked to decreased mood swings in children and a lower likelihood of anxiety and depression in adulthood.

By [Anne-Marie De Beer](#) 1 Nov 2023



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A study titled the Role of Nutrition and Diet on Healthy Mental State by Roser Granero highlights the importance of a balanced diet that entails a healthy spectrum of micro- and macronutrients.

Proper nutrition fuels a growing child's physical development, supports their immune system, and is crucial for brain growth and mental wellness. However, one aspect of a child's diet that is often overlooked is its direct impact on their mental wellness.

Healthy eating is often thought to be expensive for the average South African family. However, it need not be an expensive exercise. Basic foods that are staples in the average South African home such as maize, sorghum porridge, peanut butter, home-grown vegetables, and fermented vegetables have raised generations of young children with happy tummies.

Children who don't receive adequate nutrients may experience fatigue and difficulty focusing, which can hinder their ability to learn and engage in social activities. This can impact their self-esteem and confidence, potentially leading to behavioural issues and difficulties in forming positive relationships with peers.

## Brain-boosting nutrients

By prioritising a well-balanced diet rich in brain-boosting nutrients, caregivers can help their child develop a strong foundation for mental wellbeing. It is important to ensure that growing children receive a healthy dose of the brain-boosting nutrients that play a pivotal role in brain development and cognitive functions.

Omega-3 fatty acids found in fatty fish like salmon and flaxseeds are essential for brain development, memory, and mood regulation. These, together with essential vitamins and minerals such as B-complex vitamins, vitamin D, and magnesium are essential for mental health.

Deficiencies in these nutrients can lead to mood disorders and behavioural issues in children. Caregivers can ensure that their children's diets include a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to meet their nutritional needs. Foods that are

rich in probiotics and fibre are fundamental in ensuring a balanced tummy in their little ones, and strengthening the relationship between a healthy gut and their children's brains.

Protein is vital for the production of neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, which play a significant role in regulating mood and emotions. Incorporating lean sources of protein such as poultry, beans, and soya are great ways to support a child's mental wellbeing.

## Blood-sugar stability

Balancing blood sugar levels is crucial for maintaining mood stability. Foods that are high in refined sugars can cause blood sugar spikes followed by crashes, leading to irritability and mood swings in children.

Many of the cereals on our supermarket shelves contain high levels of refined sugars and artificial additives. This is the case despite the 'added benefits' that are often highlighted on cereal boxes.

Although many caregivers often battle in getting their young ones to eat less sugar, there are healthier alternatives that will still appease their little sweet tooths. Dried fruit and juicy fruits such as watermelon offer a great alternative to refined sugars. Complex carbohydrates such as grains and legumes have also been reported to stabilise sugar levels.



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## The impact on caregivers

A child's poor nutrition affects more than just their own wellbeing; it also affects parents and caregivers. Parents may feel stressed and worried about their child's health and behaviour, leading to emotional strain and frustration. Additionally, managing a child who is consistently irritable or low on energy can be physically and emotionally demanding for parents, making it challenging to maintain a harmonious family environment.

Parents of undernourished children often experience significant emotional stress. Witnessing their child's physical and emotional struggles can lead to feelings of helplessness, guilt, and anxiety. The constant worry about their child's health and development can be emotionally taxing.

Caring for a child who is struggling with the effects of undernourishment can be time-consuming and demanding. Parents may need to invest more time in preparing specialised meals, attending medical appointments, and providing emotional support, leaving them with less time for other responsibilities or self-care.

The stress and emotional toll of dealing with a child's nutritional issues can strain a parent's relationship with their partner. Disagreements about how to address the problem or the emotional strain of caring for a child with developmental delays can lead to conflicts.

## Mindful eating habits

Encourage mindful eating habits in children. Teach them to savour their food by chewing slowly to ensure digestion, eating without distractions, and listening to their body's hunger and fullness cues. This can help foster a healthy relationship with food and reduce emotional eating in the long run.

Dehydration can have a negative impact on a child's mood and cognitive function. The human body is made up of 70% of water which is why it is vital that pre-schoolers drink enough clean water throughout the day to stay hydrated and support optimal brain function.

Remember that a holistic approach to health, including a healthy diet, regular physical activity, and emotional support, is key.

to nurturing happy and mentally resilient children.

Should a caregiver notice persistent changes in a child's mood or behaviour, consult a healthcare professional. Sometime nutritional interventions alone may not be sufficient, and a comprehensive evaluation is necessary to address underlying mental-health concerns.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne-Marie De Beer is the nutrition, health and wellness manager at Nestlé East and Southern Africa Region (ESAR), writing for "The Growing Parent", a supportive platform for parents and caregivers with children between the ages of three and five.

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