

Nutrition for the Traumatized Child

Obviously, good nutrition is important for all children. For children who have experienced trauma either prenatally (such as prenatal exposure to drugs, alcohol, or stress) or in early childhood, good nutrition is a critical component in their brain function and healing.

Chronic stress can actually impact the way a person digests and absorbs their food so in children with higher cortisol levels due to early trauma, supplements may be needed.

When a child eats regularly scheduled nutritious snacks and meals, their blood sugar levels remain constant. This allows an optimal opportunity for learning and for regulating moods.

Dehydration causes all kinds of problems including decreased cognitive function, headaches, fatigue, poor concentration, increased anxiety, and mood swings. Getting enough water and reducing or eliminating caffeinated and carbonated drinks impacts everything from sleep to emotional regulation to playtime.

Ways to improve nutrition in children with trauma:

- set a timer to remind yourself to give your child small healthy snacks
- have a regular schedule for mealtimes so that they know what to expect
- give each child a water bottle and keep it filled all day
- remind them regularly to drink their water
- model healthy eating by eating breakfast, lunch, and supper yourself and drinking enough water

If you suspect that nutrition may be playing a role in your child's behavior, keep a food journal for two weeks. Document everything your child eats and what time and record behavioral challenges that correlate within a two hour window. Look for patterns.

If you see patterns that seem to correlate with behavior issues, try eliminating that food from your child's diet or try an elimination diet. Foods that are commonly associated with changes in behavior are gluten, dairy, sugar, colorings, and additives.

Omega-3 fatty acids are especially important for children who have FASD (fetal alcohol spectrum disorder), ADHD, or trauma. Studies show they reduce symptoms of anxiety, impulsivity, inattention, and learning difficulties. Omega-3 can be introduced through fish oil capsules, seafood, flaxseed oil capsules or flaxseed, raw almonds, raw walnuts, soybeans, spinach, and chia seeds.

Adopted children and food:

Food can be interlinked with trauma in children who have experienced neglect or were born into poverty and went hungry. Providing a feeling of safety in regards to food can take years. It is important for children, especially those who may not have had consistent access to food in their past, to know that their physical needs will now always be met. Telling them that there will always be food for them is not enough. Show them

where the food is in the house. Choose some food that they can have unlimited access to. Having very set snack times and mealtimes also helps to establish trust in the area of food.

Some children who have experienced neglect or hunger will hoard food or will eat to the point of being sick. Generally speaking, those types of behaviors will lessen once food is consistently provided but for some children, these behaviors can be long lasting. The brain is a powerful thing and sometimes even years after hunger, children will be in fear of being hungry and be hoarding food or overeating. If this is the case for your child, you need to talk to a doctor or mental health professional, particularly one who specializes in children who experienced trauma.

Malnutrition is also a consideration in neglected children who have experienced hunger. They will need supplements and a nutrient rich diet. They will also need healthy fats to help with their brain development and function. You may wish to consult with a nutritionist.

Article adapted from <https://www.thechaosandtheclutter.com/archives/nutrition-for-childhood-trauma>.