

Nurturing health through pleasure of eating

the right choices from the start

Award-winning research helps build children's healthy eating for life

- **French scientist is awarded the first Danone International Prize for Alimentation for her ground-breaking research into children's healthy eating**
- **The pioneering research could form the foundations for new advice on promoting healthy eating in children**
- ***"Healthy eating must start right from the beginning, as eating behaviour is carried through to adult life" – as implied by the award-winning research.***

A re-think in the way we feed our children is set to follow latest ground-breaking research into healthy eating behaviour. The findings herald a shift in focus from simply teaching children about nutritious foods to changing the whole healthy eating experience – right from the start.

The research has been led by French scientist Dr Sophie Nicklaus, today announced the winner of the first Danone International Prize for Alimentation (DIPA) – the global award that recognises outstanding, innovative and collaborative approaches to improving food-related health and to develop effective healthy eating strategies.

Speaking before the presentation of the DIPA at the annual congress of the American Society for Nutrition in Boston, USA, Dr Nicklaus said, *"We need to empower parents and children to make healthy food choices for life. It is not enough simply to help children to identify which foods are healthy and encourage them to eat them. We also have to take heed of other powerful influences that drive food choices."*

The power of pleasure

One such driving force is pleasure. It may seem obvious but the importance of pleasure in determining food choices is often overlooked by busy parents who are anxious for their children to eat some healthy food, said Dr Nicklaus, Research Director at the French National Institute for Agricultural Research, based at the Centre for Taste and Feeding Behaviour in Dijon.



Dr Sophie NICKLAUS, winner of 2018 DIPA.
Research Director at INRA, Centre for Taste and Feeding Behaviour in Dijon, France.

Her research has shown that children learn to derive pleasure from food through their early eating experiences – from being exposed to the taste, appearance and flavour of healthy foods, from the positive experience of eating socially with family and friends, and from developing positive attitudes towards foods. And once a child likes a food, this preference is carried through to adult life.

A change in when and how we wean infants

A child's early years are therefore a crucial time for parents to get their child on course for healthy eating. And it's easy, said Dr Nicklaus – parents just need to follow a few simple steps. First, they need to start offering their children vegetables and other healthy foods at the earliest opportunity.

Dr Nicklaus said, *"Tell parents, Don't think healthy eating can wait – start providing healthy food early in the weaning process and provide your child with the opportunity to learn tastes, flavours and textures"*.

Learning to like healthy foods is a process that can take time and patience. Parents should resist the temptation to give up as soon as their child rejects a particular food. As babies and young children develop, they can learn to like the taste of a healthy food if they're repeatedly exposed to it – it's worth offering a particular food up to 10 times before giving in. *"But there's no need to be over-ambitious"*, said Dr Nicklaus. *"The aim is to help the child transition from a milk-based to diet to a diet similar to that of the parents. So if among the huge variety of vegetables and fruits available, they like six vegetables and six fruits, then that is enough"*.

Introducing textures in food helps infants learn to chew and become more adventurous in the foods they try. Dr Nicklaus' research has also revealed that children can cope with lumpy food or pieces of food much earlier – from around 8 months old – whereas most parents wait until their infant is about a year old because they fear the risk of choking. Children are ready to start progressing through a variety of food textures when they can sit up, and the risk of choking can be minimised by feeding them slowly to allow them to process each mouthful before having the next.

Put them in charge of how much

Most children have an inbuilt ability to learn when they're full and need to stop eating, but repeated over-feeding can over-rule this natural mechanism, so the child doesn't know

when to stop eating. This can begin even before weaning and by 3 years of age some children are already struggling with their appetite control. So it's important for parents to look out for signs of when their child has eaten enough, and to trust those signs, Dr Nicklaus said.

Older kids: healthy foods are happy foods

For older children, the challenge is for parents to promote healthy foods as pleasurable foods. So foods need to look good, taste good, and ideally be seen as a treat.

This means including healthy foods in happy family occasions such as birthday parties, discussing interesting facts about a food such as where it comes from and what it tastes like, and involving children in food preparation.

Keeping healthy foods handy at home and within easy reach encourages children to help themselves when they come home hungry from school. *"It doesn't have to be a huge variety of foods, but make them available every day, make them easy to eat and make them the natural option – better still, the only option"*, said Dr Nicklaus.

But one thing for certain is to avoid telling children about how healthy a food is.

"The worst thing you can do is to say to a child, 'Eat this because it's good for you'", explained Dr Nicklaus. *"In most cases, parents are saying that when their child doesn't like the food, so the child comes to think of healthy foods as tasting bad. That can put them off any food that is labelled as being healthy"*.

Dr Nicklaus has suggested a set of practical tips, based on the research findings, to help parents put their children on course for a healthy diet for life.

10 tips for building kids' love of healthy eating

See press background.

Notes:

- * The Danone International Prize for Alimentation (DIPA) is a 100,000 Euro award set up to recognise multi-disciplinary research that represents a major advance in Alimentation – the umbrella term for all factors influencing people's food choices, eating habits and food-related health. Open to mid-career emerging leaders in the field, the DIPA will be awarded every two years by the Danone Institute International and the French "Fondation pour la Recherche Médicale".
- * The American Society for Nutrition annual congress, Nutrition 2018, is being held in Boston, USA from 9-12 June.
- * The Danone Institute International (DII) is a not-for-profit organisation aiming to promote human health through developing and disseminating knowledge about the links between food and health, and to highlight the importance of nutrition in health.
- * The French "Fondation pour la Recherche Médicale" aims to contribute to the development of pioneering and innovative French medical research, leading to medical advances for all. It is an independent organisation that operates through the generosity of its donors.

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