

Eating for Both Athletic and Academic Performance

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School is back in session and the summer slowing to an end; a Telluride summer not officially over until the last festival has swept through town. Telluridians are entering my office ready to get back into a healthy pattern of eating and drinking, remembering how much better they feel when they do.

The benefits of a sound pattern of eating also apply to our children. Academic and athletic performance as well as behavior is greatly influenced by eating patterns. Both the timing of the meals and the foods that are chosen can make a huge difference in our children's ability to stay focused and participate wholly in every aspect of their life.

Breakfast is the most important meal as it sets the tone for the rest of the day. One account reported by Alexander Schauss, a leading authority on the effect of nutrition on children's learning and behavior, gives evidence of the power of eating breakfast in a child's life. One study of his, a young boy named Clarence, had been pulled out of his classroom for disrupting the classroom on a continual basis. Clarence's IQ when tested was shown to be in the low-normal range, explaining his below average scholastic performance. In conversations with Clarence, Schauss discovered that this youngster never ate breakfast.

The first recommendation was for Clarence to eat breakfast on a consistent basis. Within three weeks of his doing so, Clarence had a 27.5 point rise in his IQ. His parents, teachers and counselors alike reported how Clarence was calmer, less moody and consistently listening to his teachers. Who doesn't know a parent or teacher who could benefit from that kind of transformation in a particular child? If a child is not starting the day with breakfast, doing so is a great place to start.

That being said, a bowl of sugar frosted cereal or piece of toast topped with jam does not satisfy the body's needs to start the day. A better breakfast would be one balanced in protein, carbohydrate and fat such as that of whole grain toast topped with nut butter or eggs and toast with a side of fruit, a protein shake, made with fruit and an added fat.

The pattern of having a balanced protein, fat and carbohydrate at each meal and snack throughout the day keeps the body's blood sugar level 'in the zone' for peak performance and concentration. While we may expect our children to know how to do this and give free reign to their decisions, as parents and teachers our guidance and modeling is needed.

To enhance your child's academic and athletic performance, both now and for the future, choose to structure meal choices around a balance of the following:

Carbohydrates (40%) - fruits, vegetables, grains, beans, legumes

Proteins (30%) - eggs, chicken, fish, beef, lamb, nuts, cheese

Fats (30%) - olive, fish and flax oils, real butter

Use foods that are fresh and come from the earth as opposed to highly processed foods that no longer have any aliveness intact. When children are fed nutritionally dense foods, their potential is maximized.

While growing up in San Diego there was a high school in my school district that was famous for the athleticism and scholastic excellence of the students as well as its magnificent marching band. Little did I know until studying for a certification exam some years later as to what was part of the school's magic. Helix High School had a savvy cafeteria manager. Gina Larson eliminated all empty-calorie, sugar laden, non-nutritious foods from the menus and snack machines at the school. Her motto: "keep bodies and brains in training".

With that, sports competitions were consistently won, injuries were significantly reduced and broken bones were eliminated. The scholastic achievements of students were in the top percentile of the state. Students were known to hurry into the cafeteria for the salads and meals that were freshly prepared. Ms. Larson had demonstrated to them how much better they felt and performed when eating healthfully.

We often think that eating healthfully will take too much time. Every parent I have worked with has found their child's improved health, performance and behavior *very much* worth the effort.

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