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Script on nutrition in the early years

Introduction

Welcome to my presentation on nutrition in the early years. This presentation will look at the importance of nutrition in the early years, the importance of nutrition during pregnancy, the effect of nutrition on children's wellbeing and development. It will also look at agencies that support nutrition in the early years.

According to Stanimirov (2012) proper nutrition is essential for children's growth, wellbeing and holistic development. It is important as he suggests that proper nutrition as a child will lay the foundation for the rest of their lives. Stanimirov (2012) also states that it is important for children to have a nutritious diet as they need the energy and nutrients from food to develop and grow. Pichère and Probert (2015) state the importance of nutrition as in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, physiological needs are the beginning, the basic human needs needed to grow and develop, including eating. Nutrition is important as if the physiological needs are not met, an individual cannot move on to the next stage.

Nutrition during pregnancy

The topic of nutrition during pregnancy will now be discussed. Langley-Evans (2015) suggests that nutrition during pregnancy is important as during the first trimester the baby is most vulnerable as it is beginning to develop vital organs. Langley – Evans (2015) also states that nutrition during pregnancy is vital as during pregnancy a woman's body uses more energy as the baby develops. According to NHS (2020a) it is important that women get the correct vitamins and minerals in their diet to ensure the foetus is getting the nutrients to grow and develop. NHS (2020a) suggests that to limit the risk of complications during pregnancy women need to ensure they are taking supplements such as folic acid, vitamin D, iron, calcium and vitamin C or making sure they are included in their diet. NHS (2020a) states that it is important to take folic acid if you are trying to conceive and when pregnant as it can prevent complications and defects. Karakochuk (2018) also supports this as they state a lack of folic acid during pregnancy can increase chances of spinal problems referred to as neural tube defects and other abnormalities. NHS (2020a) states that vitamin D is important during pregnancy as it supports the teeth, bones and muscles by controlling the body's levels of calcium.

However, it can be damaging to the foetus if more than 100 micrograms are consumed within a day. Iron is essential during pregnancy as a lack of iron can lead to anaemia. Anaemia during pregnancy can be harmful to both the foetus and mother as it can affect the mothers' muscles and movement and stomach health. Anaemia during pregnancy can also lead to an early birth and low weight at birth which can impact the baby's overall development. However, post birth, anaemia can be linked to post-natal depression, effect lactation and cause fatigue (NHS,2020b). NHS (2020a) suggests that calcium during pregnancy supports the development of the foetus's teeth and bones, and vitamin c supports the development of cells and healthy growth and development. According to Gov.uk (2012) women can access these vitamins for free due to the Healthy Start Scheme. Healthy Start is a scheme is developed by the NHS to support pregnant women or women with young children to ensure they get the vitamins and minerals they need. They can use this scheme to access fresh produce, milk and vitamins. This scheme is important as it supports children's health and wellbeing, ensuring their nutritional needs are met.

Breastfeeding

Another important element of early years nutrition to consider is breast feeding. World Health Organisation (2023) states that breastfeeding is the best way to ensure a child's healthy development and wellbeing. Breastfeeding is seen as crucial as breastmilk is infused with antibodies that prevent illness in the early years. However, even though there are many proven benefits to breastfeeding the Word Health Organisation (2023) has found that when looking at babies under 6 months old, less than half of them were breastfed. NHS (2020c) states there are many benefits of breast feeding as it ensures the infant is getting the essential nutrients they need to develop, protects infants from illness, it is free and easily accessible and breast feeding can also help develop the bond between mother and baby which supports healthy attachments. NSPCC Learning (2021) states that Bowlby's attachment theory emphasises the importance of the bond and attachment with parents or carers to allow children to develop holistically. They state that a lack of healthy attachment with caregivers can affect a child's emotional development and their ability to build relationships with others. However, there are also barriers to breastfeeding. UNICEF (2017) states that many mothers are choosing not to breastfeed as they are worried about breastfeeding in public and fear judgement. Other barriers include a lack of knowledge, a fear of breastfeeding being painful and it being inconvenient for their everyday life and going out. NHS (2020d) suggests that there are many agencies that can support breastfeeding mothers. These include your midwife and health visitor that can give advice and support, they are available to contact whenever needed and their information can be found in the child's personal child health record. There are also breast-feeding centres locally that do drop ins and a

breastfeeding helpline that provide support to mothers new to breast feeding or having difficulties.

Next, we will discuss the effects of nutrition on children's development, beginning with the cognitive effects. Georgieff (2023) states that nutrition plays a key role in the development of essential organs such as the brain. They also state that nutrition in the early years can be linked to the immune system, cardiovascular health, cancer and the risk of mental health problems. Iron deficiency in the early years can also have a negative impact on cognitive development such as memory and the brain's ability to process information and can be linked to autism and schizophrenia (Georgieff,2023). To further support this, School Nutrition (2024) state that proper nutrition in the early years is essential to support children's cognitive development as nutrition affects children's memory, ability to focus, problem solving and overall academic success. Proper nutrition is also proven to support children mental health and wellbeing as a child that is lacking magnesium or omega-3 in their diet have a higher chance of becoming depressed or anxious. Carbohydrates are also essential within a child's diet as they are converted to glucose which is how the brain gets it energy. A diet rich in carbohydrates maintains the brains glucose supply which supports children's cognitive development by maintaining their energy which improves their concentration and learning (School Nutrition, 2024).

Next, the effect of nutrition on physical development will be discussed. The British Nutrition Foundation (2025) state that it is important that children have a nutritious diet and get all the vitamins and nutrients they need as this allows their body to develop and grow in the correct way and have a healthy weight for their age range. However, the British Nutrition Foundation (2025) suggest if children are lacking the essential nutrients they require, this can have a detrimental effect on their health, lifestyle and wellbeing. For example, children with a calcium deficiency are at risk of having brittle bones and a vitamin A deficiency could lead to frequent illness as the child will not have a strong immune system. Poor nutrition can also affect children's physical health as they may have a higher chance of having diabetes or heart problems. Overeating, a lack of exercise and a poor diet can lead to children becoming obese and as a result of being obese the child is likely to have more health problems in the future and suffer with bad mental health (British Nutrition Foundation,2025).

Oral health is also an indication of poor nutrition in children. Public Health England (2017) supports this and state that children's teeth are a visible effect of poor nutrition and being overweight. They also state that children who suffer with tooth decay and poor oral health in the early years of life are likely to have problems with their adult

teeth. All children may face poor oral health, however there are factors that increase children's chance of tooth decay such as poor nutrition, a lack of knowledge, coming from a low-income family or not brushing consistently (Public Health England, 2025)

Nutrition can also have an effect on children's emotional and social development and wellbeing. Proper nutrition supports desirable behaviour, a positive attitude and promotes resilience and the ability to self-regulate. However, excess level of sugar can encourage undesirable behaviour which can have a negative impact on children's relationships with others and learning difficulties. Proper nutrition can also help to regulate children's mood (Young Academics, 2024).

The practitioner and setting play a crucial role in children's development and also have a key role in ensuring children's nutritional needs are met. For example, many practitioners provide a healthy snack or are involved in a breakfast club scheme. Many refer to breakfast as the essential meal children need to start their day and thrive. Many researchers have found that infants that consume a nutritious breakfast are likely to perform better academically, they also have improved memory, better focus and perform better mathematically. However, children that do not consume breakfast can struggle to concentrate and focus and feel tired throughout their school day. This will result in the child's needs not being met which will impact their overall health and wellbeing (School Nutrition, 2024) Practitioners can also ensure the children learn about the eat well plate and nutrition and that it is a part of the curriculum. Practitioners will also need to be aware of children's allergies and dietary requirements to protect their health and wellbeing (Children's Food Trust, 2015). Practitioners will also advise and support parents in regard to healthy eating and nutrition and ensure they are informed about free school meals. Practitioners can also be a good role model to the children in their setting and support them to make healthy choices. It is important they understand the purpose of eating fruits and vegetables and getting the correct nutrients whilst also understanding the consequences of a poor diet (Rasheed, 2023).

Conclusion

To conclude, the research shows that nutrition in the early years has a big impact on children's health, wellbeing and lifestyle and emphasises the effect poor nutrition can have in the early years and later in life. The research also highlights schemes and

support that is available to parents to support children's diet and overall development and the role that practitioners play in supporting healthy nutrition in the early years.

Thank you for listening to my presentation. I hope you enjoyed and have gained a deeper understanding of the effects of nutrition in the early years.

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