

A Family For Every Child Matching Assistance



*"We should not be asking who this child belongs to,
but who belongs to this child."*

Nutrition & Your Adopted Child

Children in the foster care system likely have nutrition deficiencies when they come into care or into your home. While you cannot go back and make up for the lack of nutrition your child experienced early in their life, you can start enforcing good eating habits now and get your child's health and diet back on track. Being aware of common nutritional deficiencies and eating disorders in foster children, and having a strong set of tools to help your child overcome these issues will be key in ensuring your child is getting the proper nutrients he/she needs and encouraging healthy eating habits.

Common Nutritional Deficiencies: Dehydration

Dehydration reduces cognitive performance, causes aggression, sleep disruption, moodiness, headaches, leg cramps, and impacts an individual's metabolism. Pre- and post-natal chronic dehydration can also impact a child. Studies have shown changes in the neurotransmitter glutamine, which can cause seizures, and violent or unpredictable behaviors. The following are signs your child is not properly hydrated:

- Their urine is dark yellow, and/or has an odor to it
- They are very thirsty
- They may be more irritable or fussy than usual
- Dizziness or headaches
- Dry skin
- Constipation

To encourage your child to drink more water, create a family plan where everyone makes a conscience effort to drink more. For example, create a rule where for every non-water beverage you consume, you must have a glass of water first. It may also help to reduce the number of dairy, caffeinated, or carbonated beverages your family drinks as these all can contribute to dehydration.

Common Nutritional Deficiencies: Malnutrition

Malnutrition can cause aggressive behaviors, acting out behaviors, externalizing behaviors, it can reduce a child's IQ level, cause rage, and is linked with Bi-Polar Disorder, ADD, and ADHD. It has been found that if a child experiences malnutrition in the first 3-years of life, the likelihood that they will have a lower IQ, social behavior issues, and aggressive behavior increases. Malnutrition can be caused by any of the following:

- A poor prenatal diet
- Premature birth or a low birth weight
- Lack of or inadequate amounts of nutritious foods
- Lack of breastfeeding
- Lack of vitamin D, either from a supplement or exposure to sunlight
- Post-adoption, a child may grow rapidly which in turn causes the body to deplete it's stored nutrition, which in turn causes malnutrition

Studies have shown that symptoms related to malnutrition (see above) are reduced simply by introducing proper nutrients into a child's diet. Omega-3 supplements, for example, have been shown to improve learning, brain functioning and communication, and a reduction in ADHD symptoms.



Substance Exposure and It's Role in Food Cravings

Prenatal substance abuse effects about 80% of children in foster care [\[Source\]](#). Prenatal substance exposure to drugs or alcohol can have a profound effect on a child's eating habits and the foods they crave. Exposure to drugs while in-utero causes changes to the dopamine receptors in the child's brain, resulting in pleasure-seeking when it comes to behaviors and also food. Alcohol exposure can cause sugar cravings. In turn, sugar cravings can indicate that a child has nutritional deficiencies.



Food and It's Relationship to a Child's Behavior

What your child eats may be having a direct impact on his/her behavior. Implementing small changes to your child's diet may bring a positive change in the behaviors you see. For example, you could try eliminating foods that have additives in them and monitor your child's behavior for a week. Or, you could put your child on a "rotation diet" where you have your child eat biologically-related foods one day (for example, wheat) and then wait 4 days before you let them eat wheat again. This can be helpful in determining if your child has any food allergies that may be causing negative behaviors. Keep a food journal, documenting all the foods your child eats during the course of the day and any behaviors that appeared afterwards. Look for patterns and relationships between certain foods and behaviors.

Remember that what works for one child may not work for another. It's also important to ensure that your child is not missing out on any key nutrients. Find ways to supplement key nutrients your child may be missing out on either from a rotation diet, dislike for a certain food, or a food allergy either through another food or a vitamin supplement. Talk to your

child's doctor about ways you can ensure your child is eating healthy and getting all the nutrients he/she needs. Don't start any type of diet for your child without consulting his/her doctor first.



Additional Information & Resources

Adoption Learning Partners Podcasts - [Dr. Karyn Purvis on Trigger Foods](#)

Adoption Learning Partners Podcasts - [Dr. Purvis in Snack, Play, Love](#)

Adoption Learning Partners Podcasts - [Snack, Play, Love: Malnutrition](#)

Adoption Learning Partners - [Snack, Play, Love Resource List](#)

Adoption Nutrition - [Common Feeding Challenges](#)

Adoption Nutrition - [Common Nutrient Deficiencies](#)

Adoption Nutrition - [Contributing Factors to Malnutrition](#)

Adoption Nutrition - [The Golden Rule of Feeding](#)

Adoption Nutrition - [The Transition Diet](#)

