

Nicole Beurkens

# THE FOOD-MOOD CONNECTION for Kids

BY: NICOLE  
BEURKENS

([HTTPS://WWW.DRBEURKENS.COM/AUTHOR/NICOLE-  
BEURKENS/](https://www.drbeurkens.com/author/nicole-beurkens/))

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**You’ve likely heard the saying “garbage in garbage out”, and now here is this more relevant than the food we eat.**

Many research studies have demonstrated a connection between the foods we eat and mood symptoms in children and adults.

When we give our kids healthy nutrient-dense foods throughout the day their mood is consistently pleasant, they have stable energy levels, and their behavior is more appropriate. However, feeding kids junk foods leads to junky moods, attitude, and behavior! While all of us benefit from consistently eating healthier foods, children and

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Some of the common mood-related concerns parents have about their kids include irritability, bouncing back and forth between elevated moods and low moods, feeling tired with low motivation, and just plain having a bad attitude. While there are many factors to consider, food is one area where simple shifts can have a big impact. Here are some of the common recommendations I give parents who are looking to help their child have consistently better moods and behavior:

- **Get off the sugar rollercoaster**

When we eat foods with higher sugar content (including sugars and refined carbohydrates) it causes our blood sugar to spike shortly after eating. This can result in better mood and energy for the short term – sometimes too much energy in the form of hyperactivity. However, our blood sugar levels inevitably crash anywhere from 15-90 minutes later once our body starts to manage the excess sugar in our bloodstream. This makes us feel more moody, irritable, unfocused, and tired. Kids who are eating foods like sugary cereals, white bread, candy, juices, and other sweet or refined foods throughout the day are on the sugar spike and crash rollercoaster all day long. This negatively impacts their mood, behavior, and ability to function. Luckily, there is a simple fix for this problem – reduce the amount of sugar your child is eating over the course of the day. Give your kids a piece of whole fruit, which is sweet from natural sugars but also contains the fiber needed to not spike and crash blood sugar quickly, instead of sugary juices, fruit snacks, or other processed fruit-based products. Avoid purchasing snacks and beverages that have high sugar content, and stay away from anything with high fructose corn syrup in it. Swap out refined carbohydrates like white breads and white flours for whole grain options that have higher fiber content and take longer to digest, thus reducing the blood sugar spikes and crashes.

- **Avoid artificial sweeteners**

If you're trying to reduce the amount of sugar your child is eating, it is important to not replace sugars with artificial sweeteners. These toxic chemicals go by names like aspartame, sucralose, Nutrasweet, Splenda, Equal, and acesulfame potassium, and are used to sweeten foods without adding sugar. While this might seem like a good idea, it is actually worse for your child's health and mood! Research has shown that these chemicals can be toxic for our brains and bodies, and negatively impact mood

for many people. Feeding your child foods and beverages sweetened with these chemicals will almost definitely lead to worse mood and behavior, so avoid them altogether.

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packaged convenience foods and meals from the drive thru. While this can save time in the short term, it definitely leads to more time and energy spent dealing with moody kids and poor behavior in the long term. Most of these types of foods are high in sugar, unhealthy fats, and refined carbohydrates while being low in beneficial nutrients. While some fast food options are definitely better than others (ex: a salad with low-sugar dressing versus deep-fried chicken nuggets), eating convenience foods like this regularly is a recipe for bad moods and even worse behavior. Take the time to grocery shop for a variety of healthier options to have on hand at home like fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables, whole grain breads and snacks, and quality meats and seafood. Find a meal planning routine that works for your family, and try to make things ahead so you're able to feed your kids healthier options even when you're on the go. Purchase and prepare higher quality snack options on the weekends, and package them in baggies or other containers to have on hand after school and in the evenings when time gets tight. Take whatever measures you can to avoid the drive-thru on a regular basis, and your kids will have more of the nutrients they need to support brain function. This will improve their mood and yours!

- **Make sure kids are eating regularly throughout the day**

One of the quickest ways to cause bad moods is not eating regularly enough throughout the day. Every week I talk to kids and teens at my clinic about the importance of eating something for breakfast, lunch, and dinner – and not letting too much time go by before eating again. Skipping meals (and even not having enough snacks) causes low blood sugar, which worsens mood and behavior. Not eating regularly enough also reduces the brain's ability to make and use neurotransmitters that are responsible for regulating our mood and behavior. Children and teens need to eat before school, even if they don't want to take the time to eat breakfast. If you notice that your child is more grumpy and poorly behaved at certain times of the day, check to make sure they have eaten recently (and not just sugar!). Many children need a good-sized snack after school, especially if they have an early lunch. Ensuring that your kids are eating every few hours throughout the day will help support better mood and behavior from the time they wake up until the time they go to bed.

Some simple changes to what and when we feed our kids can have a positive impact on their mood. If your child is experiencing irritability, mood swings, lack of motivation, or a consistent bad attitude, it's time to look at how food-related changes could help. Start by implementing even one of the above suggestions for a week and see what improves.

Have you noticed a difference in your child's mood and behavior depending on what they eat or when they eat? Post your observations and experiences in the comments below!

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