

COMMON SENSE ABOUT CHILDREN'S DIET.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



THERE are few subjects that deserve greater attention and more earnest consideration than that of the diet of children, while few receive less. Nor is it the poor or the ignorant alone who err in this matter; the rich and the educated are just as often quite as much to blame, although the mistakes made differ in the two classes. They may be none the less productive of

mischief, however, in after-life; indeed, I would go further, and say that there is more chance of an under-fed or sparsely-fed child growing up hardy than a pampered one.

I do not wish to touch, in this paper, on the food and feeding of actual infants, but I cannot help reminding mothers that a mistake, productive of much subsequent mischief, is that of thickening a baby's milk too soon. After the milk teeth have been displaced by the permanent ones, or at least most of them, infancy may be said to have given place to childhood, and nature craves for a more substantial diet. What is this to consist of? Are children to be put upon the same diet as adults, as soon as they can sit at table and use a spoon or fork? By no means. And yet this is constantly being done. Fond parents are proud to see the little ones at table, and will cut up meat, nay, even mince it, in order that they may swallow it. The meat does them good, thinks the father or mother, and verily the children will even eat to please the parent. But the very fact that children rejoice unmistakably when the pudding comes, be that pudding what it may, is proof that to stuff them to repletion with beef or mutton, or flesh of any kind, is a positive insult to Mother Nature.

Remember, I am not objecting to a portion of meaty food as an adjunct to a child's diet, but to the habit of letting them feed "like one of ourselves," as the saying is.

Surely it is easy, and sensible as well, to steer a middle course; nor should it be forgotten that it would be ten times better to give no meat at all than too much. A proof of this, and a sound one too, may be found in the fact that there are hundreds of

parishes in the Highlands, and probably in the lowlands of Scotland also, in which, with the exception probably of a little game now and then, meat is never even tasted by children of the peasant classes. Choose at random a dozen of these and a dozen of your young beef-eaters: which, think you, will weigh the most, which be the biggest in bone, the firmest in flesh, and the ruddiest in complexion? Why, the former. It may be said that the fresh air they breathe accounts for the difference. It cannot be so, because in the parishes I speak of there are rich as well as poor, and over-fed children of the former are quite as flabby as any south of the Tweed.

"What can ail my boy, doctor?" I heard a father say the other day; "he does not seem to thrive. He looks plump, but he is soft, and so inactive, and often drowsy. It can be no fault with his feeding, for we feed him *extra well*."

Yes, and it was the "extra well" that did it. This particular child is still the same lumpish lad, and likely to remain so, because common-sense advice was not acted on.

Now, as I have said, I do not object to a portion of meaty diet, but bring the child on to it gradually. I tell you what it is, reader, and I tell you candidly: if mankind was not by nature about the longest-lived and certainly the hardest animal in creation, there would be double, aye, triple the number of small graves in our churchyards that there are. And all owing to this mistake of stuffing our little ones with animal food before their digestive powers are strong enough to wrestle with it.

Before, then, the child should have meat at all with his dinner—and it is only at dinner it is ever required—he should be strengthened, and brought to it by slow degrees, by letting him have soups in lieu thereof—and these should not be too strong—and the gravy of the meat over his vegetables. The soup should not be over-fat, else it will cause loathing. It is not my place to give receipts for dishes, only to suggest what they may consist of.

And this is the place to say to those concerned in the matter of child-feeding that change in diet is most essential to health; and I might almost say, the more change the better. A child need not turn the house upside-down, for all that; for change is just as essential in the diet of grown-up folks as in our little ones', and, with one or two exceptions, the same meat will do for both. We can ring the changes, then, on good beef and mutton, chicken, rabbit, and game; but pork, and veal, and goose, and even duck, should be avoided. Eggs come, of course, into the scale of animal diet. They are most nutritious and easily digested—probably best in the form of what Americans call mush. The eggs are simply beaten up well, milk and a little salt added, and the whole turned into an enamelled saucepan—which is placed over

the fire—and stirred till thick, then some butter added. This makes a delicious breakfast dish for the delicate, either young or old.

Milk—which is *the* diet of infants—must be given plentifully to children; not as a drink, however, but in some form or other with the meals.

Well, the changes in diet should also include fish, and about this I must have a word or two to say by way of caution. While, then, a grown-up person in good health may use any kind, children should be restricted for the most part to white fish, such as haddock, cod, whiting, or even turbot or brill; but plaice and salmon are indigestible, and so should be given but sparingly. The child may be fond of salmon, but this is no proof that it is good for him. But much depends upon the amount of fresh air and exercise he has.

Tinned fish is much used in some families, but I do not think it is the best thing a child can have for dinner—not by any means.

What I want particularly to warn those who have the care of little ones against is the giving of too much animal food of any kind.

As to condiments, with the exception of salt and a little pepper, children do not need them, and ought not to have them.

Nurses should remind children while having the meat and vegetable part of their dinner that pudding is coming. This may seem simple, and not worth mentioning, but it is most essential, after all, for from the farinaceous food the great bulk of the diet should come. I think that there should nearly always be a good nutritious pudding to follow; and here again we have got to ring the changes on (say) rice, tapioca, bread, sago, corn-flour, macaroni, &c. The pudding should, of course, be made with milk, and well sweetened.

Sugar is a *sine quâ non* of children's diet. That is no reason, however, why they ought to be glutted with sweets between meals, as they too often are. Nothing tends more to injure digestion than this, to say nothing of the fact that the shop sweets are sometimes vilely and poisonously adulterated.

But it is time I was saying something about vegetables. The potato comes first in the rank. Nearly all children relish this prince of vegetables, and some are inordinately fond of it. Potatoes, however, to be really digestible should be really good, to begin with; secondly, they ought to be boiled or steamed to perfection; and thirdly, they ought to be mashed and stirred with a little milk. There is a danger even in the mashing, and it is this: if not thoroughly done, little pellets of potato are left unbruised, and these are swallowed whole by the child, and are apt to set up diarrhœa.

The same may be said about green vegetables: it is better not to give them at all unless they are very tender, and thoroughly mashed. I advise their being mixed with a little good butter while being pulped.

The white portion of cauliflower or brocoli, and vegetable marrows, are wholesome and easy of digestion.

Beans are wholesome and good also—I mean broad beans—but should be given only to children old enough to be able to skin them. Green peas are relished by little folks, but should be given very sparingly, and French beans not at all.

Parsnips and carrots are nutritious, but should be well boiled and given sparingly, especially the former.

No matter how wholesome any vegetable is, I should give it but sparingly, and, as a rule, mashed. This prevents any portion passing out of the stomach undigested, and creating irritation and mischief.

Of course, with his food a child will want drink of some kind. If left alone, and nothing else suggested, he will always be content with water. This is Nature's teaching. But milk may be mixed therewith, or even given without water. As regards tea, young children should not have it at all, and older ones but sparingly and weak; and the same may be said about coffee.

Cocoatina is wholesome and nutritious, but it must be thinly made, and plenty of milk added.

Were I asked about alcoholic beverages, I should reply that there may be rare exceptions—that under the doctor's advice some one of these may be given; but as a rule they are one and all poisons to children, and should be withheld *in toto*.

In summer weather pure water is the best drink, or whey or buttermilk sparingly, or sometimes ginger ale or ginger beer; but nothing iced, unless a mere sip.

And talking of summer brings fruit to my mind. Children will have it *volens volens* on our part, so all we can do is to get them what is most digestible, and to let them have this but sparingly.

Apples and pears should be stewed or baked, and all fruits that have many seeds or too thick skins should be avoided; we might therefore allow the strawberry, the grape, and raspberry, but withhold the gooseberry, currant, and bramble.

As to the best time of day for meals, breakfast ought to be at all events by 8.30, better at 8 o'clock, by which time every child should be out of bed and dressed. Bread and milk, or porridge made with milk, are the best breakfast dishes; hominy comes next.

About four hours afterwards dinner should come, and supper should be about half-past five.

Early to bed should be the rule. Depend upon it, if a child be not all alive and crowing by seven in the morning, he cannot be in perfect health; but as he must have had a good night's rest, he ought to be in bed by nine.

Let me add, in conclusion, that one of the most deleterious habits at table is that of eating too fast; also that the meals ought to be served every day at precisely the same time.

N.B.—All that I have said in this paper applies to the delicate invalid as well as to children, so I have killed two birds with one stone.

ERRATUM.—In my article on Water, in the MAGAZINE for March, p. 243, col. 2, 28 lines from the top, the words "two gallons" are an error for "1,000 gallons."