

Healthy snacks bolster toddlers future report card

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Pass the carrot sticks and cheese mum—research suggests eating healthy food as a toddler can help kids do better in school tests 10 years later.

The study of more than 2200 WA children's [eating habits](#) found eating fruit at age of one was linked to higher scores in mathematics, reading,

writing and spelling in Years Seven and higher scores in mathematics and reading in Year Five.

Furthermore, dairy products such as yogurt or cheese sticks were strongly linked to academic success with children who ate more dairy when they were one, two or three having better results in all areas tested.

Kids' intelligence can impact their entire lives, lead author and Telethon Kids Institute researcher Anett Nyaradi says.

"If a child has higher academic performance they will end up with [higher education](#), higher income, better jobs and high socioeconomic positions, which could influence their health outcomes," she says.

"In fact there are studies showing that children's intelligence is associated with cardiovascular outcomes, some forms of cancers and [mental health issues](#)."

The researchers says eating more wholegrains, vegetables, fruit and quality proteins such as chicken, fish and eggs form a better diet for youngsters who should also avoid processed meat, snack foods and soft drinks.

The research used data from the Western Australian Pregnancy Cohort (Raine) Study and linked it to Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment results.

Parents need to lead by healthy example

The Nutrition Specialists dietician Margaret Hays, who was not involved in the study, says improving a toddler's diet starts with parents modelling healthy eating behaviour.

Eating more dairy might mean a milk drink, cheese and crackers or yogurt or custard combined with fresh fruit, she says.

"There's lot of ways you can get your dairy in and get your fruit in [at the same time]," she says.

"Smoothies are really good and kids love them."

Dr Nyaradi says it is well known that the first couple of years of life is a sensitive period for brain development.

"During this time there is rapid brain growth," she says.

"We found a [particularly high] association between the first year diet and the academic performance.

"I think that's because, at age one, that's when the frontal lobe starts developing, which is kind of the centre of higher cognition."

The study controlled for the mother's age, education and race, family structure, breastfeeding, income and whether parents read books with their children when they were five.

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