



How to help your children have a healthy relationship with sugar

Part One-
What are free
sugars?



*Emily Caroline
Nutrition*

Sugar and children... possibly the most popular question in my inbox!

Welcome to this mini series talking through some aspects of sugar.

How can we help our children have a good relationship with food while also still aiming to follow guidelines for eating well in childhood? Read on to find out!

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What exactly are the sugars we are meant to be reducing?

I avoid talking much about sugar to children - "sugar gives us energy" is as much information as I tend to give. No big deal. We want children to grow up with a healthy relationship with food and we need to avoid saying anything about good foods vs bad foods or passing on any diet culture messages.



Whilst we need not worry about the sugars in whole fruit, when fruit is heavily processed, the cell walls are broken down and the sugar contained within becomes 'free'.

It then becomes classified as free sugars which is why processed fruit products are counted as free sugar (eg orange juice, nectar, fruit concentrate) even if they don't contain any other 'added sugar'. A product claiming 'no added sugar' can still be high in free sugars if it contains processed fruit.

Free sugars are found in natural cane sugar, honey, maple syrup, caster sugar, brown sugar, agave nectar, molasses, coconut sugar and all variants of these. Whether a sugar is 'refined' or 'unrefined' makes no difference to the free sugar definition.

As a registered nutritionist, it is absolutely not my job to judge anyone else's food choices. Indeed, even with friends and family, I rarely have opinions (or notice!) what anyone else chooses to eat, or not eat. #youdoyou

In this guide, I'm talking about the difference between 'free sugars', which have government guidelines for us all to reduce our intake, and those which are not free sugars.

Sugars found in milk and sugars found in whole fruits are not included in the sugars we need to reduce; we **do not need to concern ourselves with sugar levels in milk and whole fruit** (including unsweetened stewed or canned fruit, or dried fruit although the recommended portion size of dried fruit is smaller than fresh and advised with meals to protect teeth).



Guidelines are around free sugar intake

As I said earlier, as a registered nutritionist, it is absolutely not my job to judge anyone else's food choices #youdoyou

To answer the question of how we can help our children have a good relationship with sugar, we need to look at current recommendations for free sugars. The government guidelines are there to help try and improve the health of the nation in the long term.

The recommendations are there because sugar is the main cause of tooth decay. Sugar gives us energy but often foods which are high in free sugar give us little else in the way of nutrients. Eating lots of free sugar may mean children have less room for nutritious foods that contain the different nutrients they need to grow well. Remember that we don't need to explain all of that to children!

How to help your children have a healthy relationship with sugar

Part Two- What are the guidelines?

Age 0-4 Avoid food with sugar added to it and sugar-sweetened drinks

Age 4-6 No more than 19g per day free sugar

Age 7-10 No more than 24g per day free sugar

Age 11-adult No more than 30g per day free sugars

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How to help your children have a healthy relationship with sugar

Part Two-
What are the guidelines around sugar intake?



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Free sugars are not recommended for children under the age of 4. As a parent, I know this is *super* hard to do in practice, especially if you have more than one child, but it may be useful to keep free sugars to a minimum for children under two.

It's very easy for children to enjoy sweet tastes but we need to help them enjoy and love plainer foods that contain nutrients they need to grow well. We want to encourage their taste buds to accept the simple, ordinary and/ or more bitter flavours that we know may be less of an instant hit.

We also need to help them have a healthy relationship with all foods. No one food is 'bad' or 'unhealthy', it is the frequency that we as parents choose to offer to our children that is important.

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Current guidelines are that free sugars should be avoided until age four.

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Part Two- How to read labels

- Unfortunately free sugars are not currently listed on packaging in the UK, instead total sugars are provided.
- Free sugars do not include sugars from whole fruit or milk but do include processed fruit eg fruit concentrate, fruit powders
- Total sugars on pack can give us a guide but may include natural sugars from whole fruit and milk that we do not need to reduce



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Part Two- How to read labels

Total sugars in food
(may contain sugars from whole fruit and milk that we do not need to reduce)

| | |
|--------|----------------------|
| High | Above 22.5g per 100g |
| Medium | 5g- 22.5g per 100g |
| Low | Under 5g per 100g |



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Part Two- What are the guidelines?

A day in the life of a four year old!
Do you guess this would be over or under the guidelines for free sugar?



One ice lolly



Two squeezes of sauce on pancakes (2tsp)
Guideline is no more than 19g per day free sugar ages 4-6



One smoothie



One yoghurt



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Part Two- What are the guidelines?



5.3g free sugar



4.4g free sugar (2tsp)



21.8g free sugar



3g free sugar

Total free sugars =
39.5g or 208% of guideline amount for ages 4-6



Yoghurt contains 8g total sugar, we take off 5g for the naturally occurring milk sugars which are not counted as free sugar

In the slides above I have used examples where it is easy to work out the free sugars. In many products it is less easy and I don't think it's helpful in real life to go around with a calculator! We don't need to be preoccupied with amounts. A general awareness of foods that are high in free sugars is all we need. Then offer these when you think is suitable for your own family, no big deal, and enjoy them with your children.



How can we remain neutral about sugar?

So, we've learnt about what free sugars are and what the current recommendations are in the UK.

How can we help our children enjoy all food, be 'healthy' and also not mess up their relationship with food?

Babies at weaning and younger toddlers have different needs and it can be ideal to avoid free sugars as far as possible for this age group.

My thoughts for older children are:

- ➔ Be mindful of the sugar you are offering your children but don't necessarily tell them that!
- ➔ Remain neutral about sugary foods- they give us energy.
- ➔ Follow Satter's Division of Responsibility- as parents we choose what to offer our children.
- ➔ Avoid overt restrictions:
 - ✗ "No cake for you! Too much sugar!"
- ➔ All foods fit in a balanced diet for older children.
- ➔ Let them see you enjoying sugar when it is on the menu, like you would any other food.
- ➔ Sometimes, plan to allow children to 'eat their fill' to reduce obsession

Remember that we can 'show not tell' about free sugars- we don't need to tell children anything much about sugar.

✓ "Sugar gives us energy" is neutral. We don't need to make a big deal about it when we all enjoy sugary foods, keep it casual.

✓ "Yes, my doughnut is delicious too!" We as parents are in charge of how often we offer them different foods.

Current guideline are that free sugars should be avoided until age 4

How to help your children have a healthy relationship with sugar

Part Three- How can we remain neutral around sugar?

- ✓ When offering something sweet, call it by its name. Here's your cake. Avoid making any judgment on it.
- ✓ As the adult, you are in charge of what food is served.

When serving sweet foods, sometimes allow children

- ✓ to 'eat their fill'. This can reduce feelings of scarcity.

Constantly restricting and micromanaging their

- ✗ intake when the sweet foods are on the menu may lead to increased desire.

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Current guideline are that free sugars should be avoided until age 4

How to help your children have a healthy relationship with sugar

Part Three- How can we remain neutral around sugar?

SDOR
Follow Satter's Division of Responsibility in feeding



As parents we are in charge of what food is offered

- ✗ Good
- ✗ Bad
- ✓ Food



Enjoy your food and let children do the same

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We can enjoy sugar, be calm, confident and casual when we have armed ourselves with good information.

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Part Four- Smart swaps

Chocolate buttons → Balance the snack - add fruit and plain yoghurt

Adult sized Magnum → Smaller kid sized ice creams

"Eat your dinner to get your pudding" → One small serving alongside dinner

Fizzy drink or squash → Water between meals

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How to help your children have a healthy relationship with sugar

Part Four- Smart swaps

Constantly restricting → Sometimes allow children to 'eat their fill'

Cereal bars → Check packaging as often plenty of added sugar

Glass of orange juice → Dilute with ten parts water

Overt restrictions → Planned eating opportunities by you
eg "It's snack time and today we are having a biscuit with yoghurt and berries."
eg eating biscuits in front of children "You can't have any because it's got too much sugar"

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Part Four- Smart swaps

Kids yoghurt → Plain yogurt and fruit

Giant cookie → Share and enjoy together

Food as a reward → Time together as a reward

Juice box → Piece of fruit plus drink of water

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Part Four- Smart swaps

Donuts → Donuts
You don't have to swap everything! Eat and enjoy

High sugar kids breakfast cereal → Porridge plus ready oats with whole fruit

Food as a bribe → Other behaviour techniques

Pasta sauces, ketchup etc → Read labels and choose lower sugar options

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Current guidelines are that free sugars should be avoided until age four.

This guide has covered what free sugars are, what the current recommendations are and how we can remain neutral around sugar.

Top tips for handling sugar with older children (we know babies and young toddlers have different needs):

- ✓ Be mindful of the sugar you are offering your children but avoid overt restrictions
- ✓ Let them see you enjoying sugar when it is on the menu, exactly like you would any other food
- ✓ Remain neutral about sugary foods- they give us energy. No big deal.
- ✓ Sometimes, plan to allow children to 'eat their fill' to reduce obsession

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