



Educators and Parents Guide to THE SUPERHEROES ON YOUR PLATE



The Superheroes on Your Plate is intended to be a fun way to encourage children to be curious about some of the nutritional information they hear about foods and encourage them to invite other foods to their plate.



In no way is the selection of foods in the book exhaustive. The food characters were chosen to represent and bring forward concepts of **food groups** (vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy and proteins—meat, eggs, nuts, legumes), **macronutrients** (fat, protein, carbohydrates) and micronutrients (**vitamins** and **minerals**).

Many popular diets pit foods against one another, such as declaring one macronutrient better than another or demonising entire food groups. Although fad diets (generally and thankfully) do not target children, children are inadvertently exposed to some of these messages, which can result in confusion about the

health-promoting benefits of what they eat or, at worst, disordered eating behaviours.

The Superheroes on Your Plate intends to show that **all wholefoods fit in the diet** and to steer the conversation away from how many serves of fruit are appropriate or whether proteins are better than carbohydrates. In a sense, the book makes fun of the way we pit foods against each other.

It is not the intention of the story to suggest that only wholefood characters are welcome to the plate but to discuss those foods that children would like to invite to their plate to add nutritional value.

Key messages and concepts



The **nutritional messages** in the book are intentionally subtle so that you can decide whether or not you want to have a conversation about these topics, as is **age-appropriate**.

For younger children, you can probably stick with questions about the characters or illustrations, such as *why was brown rice parched or how could we prepare beetroot?*

The book will expose young children to words such as vitamin and mineral. However, these are complex concepts for young children to grasp as they are not tangible. For example, young children can comprehend a strawberry and that it is red, sweet, and squelchy when they smush it. However, vitamins and minerals are intangible and thus not age-appropriate for comprehension.

Older children may still not grasp these concepts, and I

always encourage a focus of nutrition education for primary school age children on tangible and sensory aspects of food, including preparation. However, children of this age are exposed to many of these words, such as calcium on the side of a milk carton or iron on a cereal box. They will hear adverts on the TV telling them something is a good source of vitamin C. Therefore, although I don't believe that educating children on macro- and micronutrients at a young age is necessary or even all that helpful, I think it is a great age to begin a conversation and association. So, for example, when orange says, 'have you heard of vitamin C?' you can ask children if they too have heard of vitamin C and in what context. It isn't necessary to explain vitamins or minerals, except to say that food provides a lot more than *yummy in my tummy*. **Food supports our bodies to grow, repair and function.**

Avoid diet talk, food rules and policing eating



I would discourage **using nutrition knowledge as a way to encourage or bribe children's consumption of foods**.

For example, avoid saying, *drink up your milk, you need calcium for strong bones* or *remember broccoli was a superhero in that book; if you eat all your broccoli, you can have dessert*. Unfortunately, this does more to reduce intake or initiate a disliking.

The dinner table should be a relaxed, **no-pressure environment to eat**, where children can choose what foods will make it onto their plate and what foods they will eat and in what quantities.

As a parent or caregiver, your role is to provide nutritionally balanced meals much of the time.

However, whether or not a child consumes a food is up to them.

So, instead of comments that push children to put food on their plate or eat it, try focusing on other aspects of the food or asking questions to promote curiosity. You could focus on the **sensory experience of eating**. So, when you serve milk, you could say, *oh, how creamy, you've got milk with your dinner tonight* or focus on yourself by noticing what you enjoy of a food and

sharing that. You could also ask questions such as *if milk were a person, what would they be saying to you right now, or can you remember what milk is good for?* Then leave it to them to try or not, to drink it all or not.

Children require repeated food exposures to develop a liking for a new food, and foods may go in and out of favour. So, be patient or try your best to hide your frustration or concern.

Furthermore, **avoid diet talk or food rules**, such as *you can't eat cookies every day, sugar is bad, I need to watch my weight, or if you(I) eat all of that, you(I)'ll get fat*. Talking about weight, weight loss, dieting, or labelling food as *good vs bad, should or should not, healthy or unhealthy* does not help children form a healthy, balanced and intuitive relationship with food. Instead, it can erode trust in their **hunger and fullness cues**, perpetuate self-blame, and attach their own morality to their food choices.

Children can learn about nutrition without it needing to be focused on diet rules and weight, just as it can and should for adults.

Suggested discussion prompts and activities



Make your own brown rice bear. Search for recipe on website.



invite a hero food to the plate

What hero food do you want to add to your plate? Or add to your hot dog or tacos? Or could share the plate with chicken nuggets? Don't judge their selection. Instead, ask them why they consider them a hero food. Is it taste or texture? Is it that it provides contrast in colour? Is it that it gives freshness or crispness? Focus on curiosity and avoid policing their selection.

Allow kids to **invite a food to their plate without pressure to eat**. Once it is there, it can just sit there, or they can poke, lick or mush. Eating it is their choice, although you could ask questions to promote curiosity.

For **fussy eaters**, this may be best done away from the dinner table and mealtimes, where the intention is purely to play.

play with your food

Play with or prepare some of the foods in the book, such as cooking brown rice or using rice in a sensory play bin with toy foods. Or prepare and sample beetroot in various ways, such as raw grated, baked, boiled, canned etc. Or try to find some of the characters in the supermarket.

invite food partners

Discuss what other foods could be added to fruit and nut, fruit salad, toast or would pair well with some of the food characters in the book.

food groupings

Have cut-outs of various foods or toy foods and ask them to **put them into groups** based on the book—health-promoting fats, fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins etc. Alternatively, **sort based on size or colour**.

explore ways to prepare foods

Ask children what other beans they eat or the ways they have eaten chickpeas—salad, curry, hummus etc. Or maybe they have never eaten sardines, but they have eaten other fish—ask what ways do they enjoy eating fish?