



Water – The Drink for Children

Water, and to a more limited extent, milk, are the only drinks children need to stay hydrated and healthy. Adequate hydration is particularly important in children, who can quickly fall ill when dehydrated.

Why water is best

Water is required by all humans to aid digestion and eliminate body waste, to allow the body to regulate its own temperature and to prevent dehydration. Children can be at higher risk of dehydration than adults, in part because they are less effective at perspiring and because their bodies generate more heat during exercise.

Children also often ignore or do not notice the warning signs of dehydration (such as headaches, irritability or feeling dizzy or tired). Dehydration in children can rapidly deteriorate into heat exhaustion, heat stroke or more serious illnesses. Children need to be reminded and encouraged to drink adequate amounts of water each day. Milk is also an important drink for children as it supplies a large percentage of children's daily calcium requirements, but water should be the main source of hydration for children.

The problem with sweet drinks

The term 'sweet drinks' includes soft drinks and cordials, flavoured milks, flavoured mineral waters, sports drinks, energy drinks, fruit drinks and fruit juices. With an ever-increasing variety of these drinks available on the market, it is easy for children to be enticed away from the best drink for them – water.

Not only are sweet drinks unnecessary, their consumption can lead to a number of health problems in children, including excess weight gain, tooth decay, diarrhoea, malnutrition and reduced appetite or fussy eating.

Encouraging water drinking

Children should always have unlimited access to safe drinking water. When children see other family members, particularly their parents drinking water, they are more likely to see water as a normal and acceptable drink.

- Teach children to drink *before* they feel thirsty. By the time a child tells you they are thirsty, they are already partially dehydrated.
- Provide water for children to drink before, during and after play, and with all meals and snacks.
- Be vigilant for any signs of dehydration. Warning signs include tiredness, dizziness, irritability, not urinating or having a dry nappy for more than six hours, urine that looks darker and smells stronger than usual, a dry, parched mouth and lips and no tears when crying.

If children complain of not liking the taste of water, try:

- Adding slices of lemon or orange or a sprig of mint to water.
- Freezing small pieces of chopped fruit in ice-blocks and adding these to water at snack and mealtimes.

If you do choose to include some sweet drinks in your family's eating plan:

- Try to choose fruit juices that are 100% juice and contain some fibre.
- Avoid keeping sweet drinks in the house, water down when offered, and limit to one small glass per day.

This Parent Fact Sheet is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website www.econnections.com.au

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