



# Food for Thought: Children's Books as Part of the Product Mix

by

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Have you ever thought about the power books can have when used as “nutrition supplements” for kids? If you haven't, the time to think about it is now. In this time of increasing childhood obesity rates, books can reinforce what kids already know about good nutrition, give them information about foods that might be new to them, and motivate them to try different foods and make better choices. Below are ten ways food-related books function as important supplements to children's understanding of healthy eating.

1. Books provide exposure to new foods: The more kids of all ages are exposed to new foods, the more likely they are to try them. Picture books can be used with little ones to start the process of encouraging kids to expand their experiential "pantry."
2. Books help kids learn to identify foods: Photo-illustrated children's picture books help empower kids to make healthy choices by teaching them to identify fruits, vegetables and other foods important to good health. When they proudly point out the foods they can name at the market, they are more likely to try them.
3. Books promote dialogue about food choices: Simple picture books can start families on the path to making healthy choices as parents and children talk about food choices when they sit together with a food-related book.
4. Books invite kids to try new tastes: Picture books are non-threatening and don't require an immediate sensory experience that involves touching, tasting, or smelling new foods. Books get them thinking about something new. In addition to introducing new foods, books can provide delectable descriptions, suggestions, recipes, and testimonials from other kids about what foods they have tried and what they like.
5. Books educate kids about their choices: Kids need help when it comes to making good food choices. They need to have easy to understand information about food and know that there are bad, good, better and BEST selections, and to understand why portion size matters.
6. Books stimulate kids' brains: The cognitive stimulation provided by reading, or "digesting" new information, and sharing it with others increases brain power! Higher literacy levels directly equate to better health, so by all means - give them books!
7. Books help develop critical awareness: Books about healthy food can be, even in small way, a medium that provides a counterpoint to televised commercials about junk food.
8. Books can empower kids: Even in the face of peer pressure, when kids have knowledge, experience, and confidence about nutrition information, they feel more comfortable choosing wisely and making requests for healthy food.
9. Books help kids explore the world of food: Books that feature foods from around the world not only expose kids to lots of new tastes and traditions, they can help create cultural understanding and encourage cross-cultural communication.
10. Books promote empathy and understanding: Food-related health concerns such as obesity, diabetes, anorexia, and peanut and other allergies are on the rise. Besides dietary issues kids themselves may

have, they inevitably encounter others struggling with different dietary issues. Information that promotes acceptance and addresses what to do in emergencies is a growing need.

Introducing information about food using picture books can begin early – as early as infancy. In fact, because of the strength of the research on the role books play in children’s brain development, health and well-being, vocabulary levels, and readiness for school, the American Academy of Pediatrics now recommends that parents and caregivers begin sharing books with babies by six months of age.

And, while exposing kids to information is essential, it is only one part of the picture. Affective learning that moves kids toward developing new attitudes about food is also required if we want them to try new tastes and textures and make increasingly healthy changes in their diet. They need to feel empowered to make good choices in the face of peer pressure, bad habits, and commercialism.

Since the results we want aren't just cognitive, but attitudinal and behavioral as well, the way in which the information is delivered must be dynamic, compelling, colorful, and incorporate some type of learning activity that reinforces the concepts on the page. Depending on the age of the child, such activities could include coloring or drawing, cutting and gluing, discussion, debate, or writing. Books of all kinds that incorporate food and food issues within many different genres are therefore vital in this effort. The earlier we begin helping kids develop “food literacy” the better.

For example, beautiful, photo-illustrated picture books in sturdy board book format are appropriate for infants and toddlers and can help them begin to identify fruits and vegetables and food groups, while also presenting basic skills such as colors, numbers, and shapes. As they grow and can hold a crayon or pencil, preschoolers love to use fun activity books which incorporate new information and skills, and food-related books are a perfect choice. Youngsters also enjoy nonfiction picture books that explain how food grows, where it comes from and who the people are that grow or raise it. Always popular of course, are story books about finicky eaters, messy eaters, and other issues small children can identify with.

With adult help and supervision, kindergarteners on up can use children’s cookbooks that offer great information and simple recipes. Colorful books about gardening, activity guides about creating a school or community garden, and real life stories about school children organizing and working on volunteer activities such as a food drive provide both information and motivation to elementary students. As kids get into middle school and high school, novels and short stories that focus on characters facing choices or struggles around food (i.e. hunger, vegetarianism, overeating, bulimia, food aversions) can promote meaningful dialogue and self discovery. Non-fiction books that introduce socio-political, scientific, and economic issues related to food and food systems encourage analytical thinking and development of critical perspectives.

Since books offer so many benefits to consumers, one wonders why children’s picture books aren’t ubiquitous in all supermarkets, food and nutrition-related specialty stores, Farmers’ Markets, and direct-sales programs. When added as part of the product mix, customers perceive beautiful, quality books as having high, lasting value. Their eye-catching presence and low cost encourage customers to purchase a picture book for their child instead of giving in to their demand for a treat. Their prominent display promotes guilt-free impulse buying for self or for others: after all – it’s “just” a book about good nutrition!

The retailer also benefits from adding books to the product mix. Making them available for sale communicates to the consumer that the retailer cares for their health and well-being. Books are high margin, non-perishable products that promote goodwill and generate extra income.

Books are also beneficial to the retailer when used as promotional premiums. High quality, smaller format, colorful picture books about fruits and vegetables make great giveaways to families when they enter the produce department with their children. Giving out books as premiums is a great choice for retailers not only because of their perceived high value and goodwill, but because bulk quantities can be purchased at greatly discounted prices. For very large numbers, books can be had for cents on the dollar.

Just imagine the benefits to society if an entire generation were given a steady diet of *these* nutrition supplements. We would healthy, vital, active, educated and engaged consumers, instead of what is currently being predicted: a generation that is in poor health, and is predicted to have a shorter lifespan than their parents.

What would a world look like if all consumers, voters, and parents were food-literate? Let's begin the conversation. Email me at [peggy@brainchildpress.com](mailto:peggy@brainchildpress.com) or go [www.brainchildpress.com](http://www.brainchildpress.com)

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