NUTRITION AND DEVELOPMENT

Marcia Bristow is a registered dietitian nutritionist who holds a Masters of Science in Dietetics from the University of Vermont and owns a nutrition counseling practice, Fueling Fitness, PLLC in Shelburne, Vt.. In addition to her nutrition counseling practice, she teaches Sports Nutrition at the University of Vermont and coordinates a practicum program for undergraduate nutrition and food science majors. Marcia also serves on the boards of the Vermont Dietetics Association, and Hunger Free Vermont. As an educator and counselor, Marcia strives to provide education and increased awareness to help her students and clients achieve their personal weight, health, and performance goals through diet and exercise.

Nutrition and Early Development

Eighty percent of a child’s brain development occurs in the first three years of life, rapidly producing billions of cells and hundreds of trillions of connections, or synapses, between these cells. In order for this crucial development to occur properly, children’s brains need appropriate fuel in the form of good nutrition. A car needs oil, gas, and other materials in order to run properly. Like cars, our brains need adequate fuel to function and excel.

Nutrition is key to building robust brain connections to support a strong foundation for future learning and social–emotional development. If we do not properly fuel this growth with a good balance of essential nutrients—such as omega-3, iron, and protein—research shows that we may impair our cognitive and motor development. One way to ensure optimal growth, maintenance and
health of the body is through proper nutrition. The nutrition and environment provided by parents and caregivers can have a lifetime impact on the eating patterns and health of their child.

Currently, Vermont is facing some challenges:

- 1 in 4 children live in homes without consistent access to adequate food
- 13% of two- to four-year-olds are overweight
- 40–50% percent of children are showing up to kindergarten unprepared to learn

Food insecurity and inadequate nutrition in early childhood contributes to lack of school readiness and threatens healthy brain development. Children who don’t have enough to eat, or are surviving on poor quality foods and an unbalanced diet, will reduce their activity and withdraw from their environment. This withdrawal removes children from critical learning opportunities and crucial social interactions. Nerve pathways that are not reinforced through activity and learning get pruned away – ultimately affecting the structure and function of the child’s brain for their lifetime.

Vermonters agree that every child deserves a strong start and an equal chance in life. In order to ensure the success of all Vermont children in school, relationships, and the workforce, we need to make sure that each child has their critical needs met, such as: nurturing and protective relationships, appropriate learning opportunities, and access to adequate nutrition to fuel learning and growth during the earliest stages of life. School readiness depends on a child’s ability to actively engage in all of the learning opportunities that each day offers, and to be well-nourished to grow and develop healthfully. The job of getting children ready to succeed in school starts the day they’re born, with quality early experiences and adequate fuel to prepare them for life.

**OTHER ARTICLES**

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