



The Parent's Food & Behavior Detective Guide

Your Partner in Supporting Brain
Balance and Better Behavior



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Introduction: This Guide is For You

Why This Guide Matters for ALL Parents

You don't need to be in crisis mode to benefit from this guide. Your child doesn't have to have extreme behavior issues to make better food choices or support your child's brain development.

This guide is for every parent who wants to:

- Give their child the best chance at emotional balance
- Support focus and learning through nutrition
- Reduce typical childhood behaviors like tantrums, mood swings, and hyperactivity
- Be proactive about brain health and healthy development
- Make informed choices without feeling overwhelmed

Brain Balance Through Better Food Choices

Your child's brain is growing at an incredible rate. What they eat directly affects:

- Mood stability – fewer meltdowns, better emotional regulation
- Focus and attention – improved learning and concentration
- Energy levels – steady energy without crashes
- Sleep quality – easier bedtimes, better rest
- Behavior – reduced aggression, better impulse control

Small changes in nutrition can create big improvements in daily life.

A Proactive Approach to Supporting Your Child

Maybe your child is developing just fine. Great! These strategies will support continued healthy development.

Maybe you've noticed some challenging behaviors. That's okay! You're taking steps to understand and support your child better.

This guide helps you look at your child's behavior through the lens of nutrition and brain development. You'll learn to:

- Identify food-behavior connections
- Make simple swaps that support brain health
- Track patterns to find what helps your child thrive
- Know when to seek professional support

You don't need perfection. You need information, practical strategies, and encouragement. That's exactly what this guide provides.

Part 1: Foundation for Every Family

Universal Strategies That Help All Kids

Before diving into detective work, let's cover basic nutrition principles that benefit every child's developing brain. These aren't complicated. They're simple swaps and habits that make a real difference.

Protein: The Brain's Building Block

Protein is essential for brain function, focus, and emotional regulation. Many children don't get enough, especially at breakfast.

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Why protein matters:

- Provides steady energy without blood sugar crashes
- Supports neurotransmitter production for mood and focus
- Keeps kids fuller longer, reducing grazing on snacks
- Essential for growth and brain development

Easy ways to add more protein:

- Start the day with eggs, yogurt, or protein smoothies (if no allergies)
- Keep hard-boiled eggs ready in the fridge (if no allergies)
- Offer protein-rich snacks between meals
- Add nuts, seeds, or nut butters to breakfast and snacks

Children need protein at breakfast especially. Starting the day with protein sets their brain up for better focus and mood stability all morning.

Healthy Fats: Brain Fuel

Healthy fats are crucial for brain development and function. Children's brains need fat to build cell membranes, produce hormones, and absorb vitamins.

Best sources of healthy fats:

- Avocado and avocado oil
- Olive oil and coconut oil
- Nuts and seeds (if no allergies)
- Fatty fish like salmon
- Grass-fed butter or ghee
- Animal fats like beef tallow or duck fat

Yes, animal fats! Quality animal fats from grass-fed sources provide nutrients that support brain health. Don't be afraid to cook with these traditional fats.

Avoiding Seed Oils: A Simple Change with Big Impact

This might be new information, but it's important: **industrial seed oils can contribute to inflammation in the body and brain.**

Seed oils to minimize or avoid:

- Canola oil
- Soybean oil
- Corn oil
- Cottonseed oil
- Safflower and sunflower oil (in large amounts)

These oils are highly processed and chemically extracted. They're in most packaged foods, restaurant meals, and processed snacks. While you can't eliminate them completely, reducing them helps.

What to use instead:

- Olive oil for salads and low-heat cooking
- Avocado oil for higher-heat cooking
- Coconut oil for baking
- Butter, ghee, or animal fats for cooking (great options)

This swap alone can reduce inflammation that affects mood, focus, and behavior.

Hydration: Often Cranky Kids Are Thirsty Kids

Dehydration affects behavior more than most parents realize. Children often don't recognize their own thirst, leading to irritability, poor focus, and emotional dysregulation.

Why hydration matters for behavior:

- Proper hydration supports brain function
- Sipping water throughout the day helps with self-regulation
- Breathing and hydration work together for nervous system regulation
- Even mild dehydration affects mood and attention

Simple hydration strategies:

- Keep a water bottle accessible all day
- Have your child sip water regularly, not just when thirsty
- Consider alkaline water as a good choice for better hydration
- Use stainless steel or glass bottles instead of plastic

Sipping water throughout the day helps children self-regulate. The act of pausing to drink water naturally slows them down and coordinates their breathing, which calms the nervous system.

Often when we think a child is hungry or having behavior problems, they're actually just thirsty. Before addressing behavior, offer water first and see what happens.

Reduce Processed Foods and Added Sugars

Processed foods with artificial ingredients and high sugar content directly impact behavior, focus, and mood.

What to watch for:

- Artificial food dyes (linked to hyperactivity and focus issues)
- High sugar content causing energy spikes and crashes, especially avoid refined sugars
- Excessive amounts of unhealthy fats
- Chemical preservatives and additives

Simple swaps:

- Choose whole fruits over fruit snacks or juice
- Offer water with fruit slices instead of sugary drinks
- Make simple snacks at home when possible
- Read labels and choose options with fewer ingredients
- Chose fresh over proceed when possible

You don't need to be perfect. Just make better choices when you can. Every small change adds up over time.

Part 2: When Behaviors Escalate - Becoming a Food Detective

For some children, typical food improvements help but aren't enough. If your child shows more significant behavioral challenges, food sensitivities might be playing a role.

Signs That Food Sensitivities May Be Affecting Your Child

Behavioral signs:

- Severe tantrums or aggressive behavior that seem sudden or intense
- Hyperactivity that interferes with daily activities
- Difficulty focusing or sitting still beyond typical age expectations
- Mood swings that seem to come out of nowhere
- Anxiety or emotional overwhelm

Physical signs:

- Frequent stomachaches or digestive issues
- Chronic congestion, runny nose, or ear infections
- Skin issues like eczema or rashes
- Sleep problems or night waking
- Chronic constipation or diarrhea
- Dark circles under eyes

Common Food Sensitivities

The most common food sensitivities in children include:

Dairy – milk, cheese, yogurt, butter

Gluten and wheat – bread, pasta, crackers, baked goods

Eggs – in many baked goods and breakfast foods

Soy – in many processed foods, often hidden

Corn – corn syrup, cornstarch in processed foods

Artificial dyes and additives – in many packaged snacks and treats

Nuts – tree nuts and peanuts

Food sensitivities are different from allergies. Allergies cause immediate reactions like hives or breathing problems. Sensitivities cause delayed reactions (1-3 days later), making them much harder to identify without careful tracking.

The 7-Day Food and Behavior Tracking Plan

To identify food-behavior connections, you need to track systematically. Use this simple daily log:

Each day, record:

- What your child ate for each meal and snack
- Any behavioral challenges (time, intensity, duration)
- Physical symptoms (stomach issues, rashes, sleep problems)
- Energy levels and mood throughout the day
- Any patterns you notice

Track for at least 7 days to see patterns emerge. You might notice:

- Behaviors worsen 2-3 days after eating dairy
- Mornings are worse after bedtime snacks with food dyes
- Afternoons are calmer when breakfast included protein
- Sleep is better on days without processed snacks

These patterns tell you what your child's body needs and what it's struggling with.

Elimination and Reintroduction Process

If tracking reveals potential problem foods, speak to your child's doctor about testing your findings through elimination and their recommendations.

This process takes time and patience, but it can give you concrete answers about what helps or hurts your child's behavior and development.

Part 3: Practical Tools and Resources

Easy Food Swaps

Instead of This

- Sugary cereal
- Fruit snacks
- Goldfish crackers
- Juice boxes
- Seed oil cooking
- Packaged cookies
- Chicken nuggets (processed)
- Candy
- Processed lunch meat

Part 3: Practical Tools and Resources

Easy Food Swaps

Try This

- Plain oatmeal with fruit and nuts
- Fresh fruit with nut butter
- Cheese cubes and apple slices
- Water or milk
- Olive oil, coconut oil, butter, or tallow
- Homemade treats with simple ingredients
- Homemade baked chicken strips
- Fresh or dried fruit
- Real cooked meat sliced at home

Protein-Rich Snack Ideas

- Hard-boiled eggs
- String cheese or cheese cubes
- Greek yogurt with berries
- Nut or seed butter on apple slices
- Hummus with vegetables
- Turkey or chicken roll-ups
- Chicken cubes
- Trail mix with nuts and seeds
- Protein smoothie with fruit
- Beef jerky (no artificial ingredients)
- Cottage cheese with fruit

Daily Food and Behavior Tracking Log

Date: _____

Breakfast (time & food):

Morning Behavior/Mood/Energy:

Morning Snack (time & food):

Lunch (time & food):

Afternoon Behavior/Mood/Energy:

Afternoon Snack (time & food):

Dinner (time & food):

Evening Behavior/Mood/Energy:

Sleep Quality:

Physical Symptoms (stomach, skin, congestion, etc.):

Notes/Patterns Observed:

Food Sensitivity Tracker

Food Being Tested: _____

Elimination Period: _____ to _____

Response to Reintroduction:

- Day 1:
- Day 2:
- Day 3:
- Day 4:
- Day 5:

Conclusion: Is this a problem food? Yes / No /
Unsure

Daily Checklist for Brain-Supporting Nutrition

Print this and put it on your fridge as a daily reminder:

- Child had protein at breakfast
- Offered healthy fats (avocado, nuts, quality oils/fats)
- Child sipped water throughout the day
- Served whole foods, minimal processing
- Avoided or minimized seed oils
- Limited artificial dyes and additives
- Child had regular meals/snacks (not constant grazing)
- Offered variety of colors in fruits/vegetables

You don't need to check every box every day. This is a guide, not a test. Progress over perfection!

Part 4: Working With Your Pediatrician and Other Professionals

When to Seek Professional Help

You should talk to your child's pediatrician if:

Behavioral concerns:

- Aggressive behavior that's dangerous to self or others
- Severe tantrums lasting more than 20-30 minutes regularly
- Extreme hyperactivity interfering with daily life
- Anxiety that prevents normal activities
- Behaviors getting worse instead of better

Physical concerns:

- Not gaining weight appropriately
- Frequent illnesses or chronic health issues
- Severe digestive problems
- Significant sleep disturbances
- Skin conditions that don't respond to typical treatment

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Food-related concerns:

- Your child eats fewer than 30 different foods
- Extreme reactions to food (beyond normal pickiness)
- Gagging or vomiting with foods regularly
- Suspected food allergies vs. sensitivities

Trust your instincts. If something feels wrong, ask for help. Early intervention makes a real difference.

Questions to Ask Your Pediatrician

About Behavior and Nutrition:

1. Could food sensitivities be contributing to my child's behavior?
2. Should we test for specific food allergies?
3. Are there nutritional deficiencies I should watch for?
4. Would you recommend seeing a nutritionist or dietitian?

Would an elimination diet or testing for food sensitivities be helpful?

About Development:

- Are my child's behaviors within typical range for their age?
- Should we consider developmental screening?
- Would occupational or speech therapy be helpful?
- Are there underlying conditions we should rule out?

About Next Steps:

1. What professionals would you recommend we see?
2. How do I get referrals for specialists?
3. What timeline should I expect for seeing improvements?
4. How often should we follow up about these concerns?

Bring your tracking logs to appointments. They provide valuable information that helps doctors understand your child's patterns.

Who Else Can Help

Pediatric nutritionist or dietitian – Helps ensure adequate nutrition while addressing sensitivities

Occupational therapist (OT)– Addresses sensory issues, self-regulation, and daily functioning

Speech therapist (ST) – Helps with communication and feeding issues related to oral motor skills

Feeding specialist – Specifically trained to address eating difficulties and food aversions (usually this is a ST but could be an OT).

Developmental pediatrician – Assesses overall development and can diagnose underlying conditions

Naturopathic doctor or functional medicine practitioner – Takes a whole-body approach to health, often focusing on gut health and nutrition

Additional Support for Picky Eating

If your child's eating challenges go beyond the scope of this guide, we have comprehensive resources specifically about picky eating:

Understanding the difference between typical pickiness and problem feeding: Read our blog: [Picky Eating vs Problem Feeding: When to Worry About Your Child](#)

Learning practical strategies to help your child try new foods: Read our blog: [How to Help Picky Eaters Try New Foods: Food Exposure Strategies That Actually Work](#)

These resources provide detailed guidance on feeding challenges, including when to seek professional feeding therapy.

Part 5: Encouragement for Your Journey

Real Talk for Overwhelmed Parents

Let's be honest: this is hard. You're already doing so much as a parent. Adding food tracking and elimination diets feels overwhelming. Some days you'll do great. Other days you'll serve chicken nuggets and goldfish crackers, and that's okay.

This guide isn't about perfection. It's about progress.

You don't need to overhaul your entire kitchen tomorrow. You don't need to eliminate every processed food from your home. You don't need to track every single thing your child eats forever.

What you need is information, awareness, and small, manageable steps forward.

Start Small, Stay Consistent

Pick ONE thing from this guide to focus on this week. Just one.

Maybe it's adding protein to breakfast. Maybe it's swapping out one seed oil for olive oil. Maybe it's making sure your child has a water bottle available all day. Maybe it's starting a simple food and behavior log.

Do that one thing consistently for a week. Then add another small change. Then another.

These small changes compound. Six months from now, you'll look back and realize you've made significant improvements without the overwhelm.

Trust Your Observations

You know your child better than anyone. If you notice patterns between food and behavior, trust that. If something feels off, it probably is.

Don't let anyone dismiss your concerns with "all kids do that" or "they'll grow out of it." Yes, many challenging behaviors are developmentally normal. But if food sensitivities are making them worse, addressing that helps your child now. Your instincts are valuable. Trust them.

Celebrate Small Victories

Progress looks like:

- One calm morning after a protein-rich breakfast
- One successful elimination of a problem food
- One pattern identified through tracking
- One peaceful meal without a meltdown
- One professional who listens and helps

These aren't small victories. They're huge. Celebrate every single one.

Be Kind to Yourself

Some days you'll feel like you're failing. You'll serve processed foods. You'll forget to track. You'll lose your patience at dinner. You'll feel like none of this is working.

Those days happen to every parent. They don't erase your progress. They don't mean you're failing. They mean you're human.

Tomorrow is a new day. Start again. Keep trying. Keep learning about your child's unique needs.

Remember: You're Not Alone

Thousands of parents are navigating these same challenges. Food sensitivities, behavioral struggles, and the overwhelm of trying to figure out what helps are incredibly common.

You're not alone in this journey. Keep reaching out. Keep seeking support. Keep advocating for your child.

Quick Reference Guide

The Basics (Do These First)

1. Add protein to breakfast
2. Offer water throughout the day
3. Choose healthy fats for cooking
4. Reduce processed foods when possible
5. Read labels for artificial dyes and additives

If Behaviors Are Concerning (Food Detective Mode)

1. Track food and behavior for 7 days
2. Look for patterns (2-3 day delayed reactions)
3. Talk to your child's doctor about eliminating suspected foods for 2-3 weeks
4. Observe changes carefully
5. Reintroduce and watch for reactions

When to Get Help

- Behaviors are dangerous or getting worse
- Physical symptoms persist
- Growth is affected
- Your child eats fewer than 20 foods
- Your gut tells you something is wrong

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Remember

- Progress over perfection
- Small changes add up
- Trust your instincts
- You're doing better than you think
- Your child is lucky to have you

Resources and Next Steps

Recommended Reading

Books:

- Disconnected Kids by Dr. Robert Melillo (brain balance and development)
- Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense by Ellyn Satter (feeding dynamics)
- The Out-of-Sync Child by Carol Kranowitz (sensory processing)

Articles:

- ["Food Dyes: A Rainbow of Risks"](#) (research on artificial dyes)

Helpful Websites

- [Brain Balance Centers](#) (information on brain development)
- [Ellyn Satter Institute](#) (feeding guidance)

Our Other Resources

Blogs that complement this guide:

- [How Nutrition Affects Child Behavior: What Every Parent Needs to Know](#)
- [Picky Eating vs Problem Feeding: When to Worry About Your Child](#)
- [How to Help Picky Eaters Try New Foods: Food Exposure Strategies That Actually Work](#)
- [Why My Child Can't Self-Regulate: Understanding the Root Causes](#)

Final Encouragement

You're at the end of this guide, but really, you're at the beginning of a journey. A journey of understanding your child better, supporting their unique needs, and creating an environment where they can thrive.

This journey won't always be easy. There will be setbacks. There will be days when nothing seems to help. There will be times when you question everything.

But there will also be victories. Moments of clarity when patterns suddenly make sense. Days when your child is calmer and happier. Breakthroughs when you identify what really helps.

Keep going. Keep observing. Keep trying. Keep trusting yourself.

Every healthy choice you make matters. Every pattern you identify helps. Every professional you consult adds to your understanding. Every day of tracking gives you valuable information.

You don't need to have all the answers today. You just need to take the next small step.

Your child is fortunate to have a parent who cares this much. Who's willing to do the detective work. Who sees their struggles with compassion and wants to help.

You've got this. Even on the hard days. Even when progress feels slow. Even when you're exhausted.

You've got this. And your child is so lucky to have you.

I have prayed over this guide that ever one who reads it will feel encouraged, have strength, and the provisions they need to make healthier choices for their child.

*With hope and encouragement for your journey,
Kendra Pediatric Occupational Therapist & Mom*



Disclaimer: This guide is for educational purposes and based on research, personal testimony and clinical experience. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Always consult your child's pediatrician, a qualified nutritionist, or other healthcare professionals before making significant dietary changes or if you have concerns about your child's health, nutrition, or development.