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“These Things I Know for Sure”

E.M. Burton shares nutrition tips learned as her family’s in-house expert.

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All images: E.M. Burton

At the L.A. Fitness Expo in January, an astounding claim was made by the presenter of *CrossFit Kids Eat This!*, a short film on nutrition for children.

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"If your kid is gonna CrossFit," ran the introductory comments, "these are 10 things you need to know about food."

Then came the assertion of knowledge and its claim to certainty.

Who would make such an outrageous statement?

I would.

What do parents of CrossFitting kids need to know to support their child's fitness?

On-the-Job Training

I should start at the beginning. I'm not a nutritionist. I'm not a doctor, nor a scientist. I'm not a chef and don't sell food. I have, however, been navigating the issues of nutrition for optimized performance for quite some time. One could say that I am a somewhat "reluctant autodidact" on the matter. I don't tell anyone what to eat, but every day for the last five years I have determined what goes into the mouth of another, less experienced human being. Five years ago, I took on a trainee: my small child.

I'm only partly joking because sometimes it helps to think of our relationship this way, and I remind myself of my role when I slip up, as we all do. As soon as you have children, you have to start training them in how to eat for the performance of their life, no matter what that might be.

Twenty minutes in length, *CrossFit Kids Eat This!* comprises 10 videos, each on one aspect of nutrition that will concern parents of CrossFitting children. CrossFit Kids ran the video in a continuous loop at its presentation space at the 2011 and 2012 Los Angeles events, and at the Arnold Sports Festival in March 2011.

"What are the most important considerations in nutrition for children—active and otherwise—and how do you communicate that to them, let alone their parents ... ?" ran the hopeful brief I set down for myself. What do parents of CrossFitting kids need to know to support their child's fitness?

In the planning stages, I assumed a generic viewer who would have no knowledge of the subject matter; the audience would be generalist, trade-show attendees, and it would include children. Brevity would be essential. In order not to forget something critical, I imagined what I would say to aliens about the care and feeding of a human child and narrowed the list to 10 things the aliens, knowing absolutely nothing about human nutrition, would need to know for sure. Expo visitors might have seen some of the following: *On Proportion*; *Fat, Good*; *Water*; *Fish Oil*; *A Little Goes a Long Way*; *Protein*; *ABCs of Vegetables*; *Fruit Salad*; *What Are You Reading?*; and *On Sugar*. The videos prominently featured food that can be thought of as "functional."

The videos were all shot on the same day and edited the next. They could have been called "30-minute films" because each was shot in 30 minutes and edited in 30 minutes. The pacing was designed for screening at a trade show. In general, however, they fit nicely into the theme of my Kitchen Disaster Films series. All kitchens are potential disaster zones. To a child, that aspect of kitchens, and food prep in general, can be exciting and scary all at the same time—in the way that all disaster zones are simultaneously forbidding and enthralling.



As with fitness, the best way to get your children to eat well is to lead by example.



The face of real food.

To capture a child's attention, I used all the bells and whistles: stop-frame animation and variable speeds, a wee bit too much Ken Burns effect, the "chalk and talk" didactic method I picked up in school, simple letters on a black background (sometimes animated). Nothing was made to be pretty. It's good-food prep, metaphorical warts and all. The fingerprints might disturb some cooking-show producers, but I think kids can handle it; they love the beautiful and the ugly in things in equal measure. The "hand ballet" that goes on when you compress a lot of meal-prep time into mere seconds of video might be mildly entertaining, as well. Because parents make the majority of decisions concerning a child's diet, the films also had to appeal to adults.

It's worthy of note; by showing pictures of real, whole food at the L.A. Fitness Expo, we were the aliens. The majority of presenters at California's largest fitness event were focused on bodybuilding and not about functionality. Dan Edelman described this phenomenon in [his write-up](#) of the event. Bodybuilding is all about visuality, about the physical changes manifested in the body; this is self-evident in the expressly stated goal of improving "physique." At CrossFit, we don't build bodies, we build capacity; for a lot of people that's a completely alien concept.

Educating Kids Through Parents

Aliens in need of information aside, the issue is critical. What parents know or don't know translates into what we do and how and what we feed our children. All kids need excellent nutrition, but for those who want to be physically fit, proper nutrition is even more critical. Navigating the information available can be a significant challenge for most people. And that's just the conscious stuff.

Parents—all adults—transfer all kinds of knowledge or ways of understanding the world onto children, whether or not they are aware of it.

There is nobody, however, who can tell you definitively, "Eat these and not these foods and you will be in perfect health." You have to establish a way of eating that is based on everything you've considered critically.

Barring obvious socioeconomic barriers such as poverty, often the only barrier to a child having access to good nutrition is the parents' lack of access to information, lack of ability to process that information or laziness. All these barriers must be overcome. Food is one of the most significant in the hierarchy of human needs; learning how and what you feed your child is one of the most important parenting skills, and you're going to have to deal with it sooner or later. Dealing with it sooner will be easier and less costly considering the tremendous costs of lost opportunities: ill health and disease.

Learning how and what you feed your child is one of the most important parenting skills.

If you try to prioritize the issues of food for children, you will face the fact that the field of nutrition is massive and often produces confusing or conflicting information. Enter "children's nutrition" into the search string at the National Institute of Health's database and it will yield over 10,000 articles. These concern, among other things, programs in schools, aspects of nutrition in Bangladesh, nutrition in orphans, children who can remember what they just ate, the contexts in which children live and eat, relationships to physical activity, parents' lifestyles ... and so on.

If you did, in fact, read the database contents, and everything else you could get your hands on, you could synthesize the data points down to a single common denominator: "Eat a balanced diet and get regular exercise."

One of the tenets of nutrition science continues to be one of "balance," so you have to consider that as a high priority. In practice this means eating from a wide variety of foods and balancing your hormonal levels through the composition of macronutrient-balanced meals and snacks.

For example, the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases suggests that a healthy diet is one that "emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products; may include lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs and nuts; (and) is low in saturated fats, trans fat, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars" (1).

Whatever bad food habit you and your family have that you all just cannot give up is likely the very thing you should.

CrossFit's World Class Fitness in 100 Words is now legendary in the CrossFit community, and this is likely because it is still the most elegant description one can find of a way to eat: Eat meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no sugar. Keep intake to levels that will support exercise but not body fat.

Once you've established a pattern of eating in a child that also considers joy and pleasure, you've laid the groundwork for a lifetime of superior health.

Metabolic syndrome is the single most important health concern facing North Americans today, with millions of people in the West suffering its ill effects. We know scientifically, however, that normalizing your blood-sugar levels ameliorates it: eating in such a way as to maintain blood sugar within an acceptable range delivers measurable benefits in fitness and overall health. This is the same for everyone, not just for athletes with goals to improve their performance.

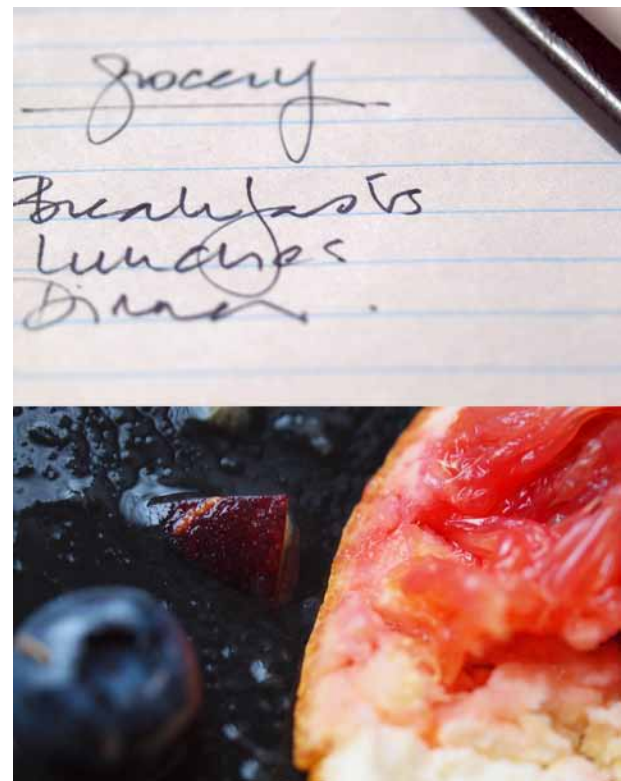
How You Eat

Each individual should establish a pattern of eating that comprises a balanced ratio of fat, carbohydrate and protein every single time he or she sidles up to the trough. Balancing hormone levels and reducing inflammation by eating in this way—and not through medication—significantly increases margins in the standard, measurable markers of health and fitness. That is what should be thought of as baseline health.

Once the baseline is established, an individual's diet can then be tweaked to achieve personal goals. Rather than thinking of one's fuel supply in terms of either quality or quantity, it should be thought of as both. Achieve ongoing balanced blood-sugar levels, then combine issues of quality into the mix. Whether the individual is an athlete in your box or your CrossFitting child, it is perhaps helpful to think of this as a practice of everyday life. What this also means is that, in order of magnitude, how you eat is more important than what you eat. Unless you have deadly food allergies, what you eat will be for the most part determined by your culture, your belief systems and your habits.

The CrossFit community's oft-repeated phrase "you're just one meal away" from being in the Zone—referring to the hormonal balance you can maintain through eating food in certain proportions—is more powerful a concept than many realize. It also signifies that it's never too late to start. Wrap your head around what balanced meals look like and you've changed the way you eat forever.

On Proportion: [.mov .wmv .mp4](#)



Every meal is an opportunity for better health.

What to Do

If parents of CrossFitting Kids ask you for advice on nutrition, here are a few tips we learned during the process that can help them establish a practice of eating well:

1. Lead by example—Learn what comprises a balance of fat, protein and carbohydrates based on ratios established by the scientific community, and serve them. Let your kids see that you eat this way—the patterns are critical—at the same time demonstrating what balanced meals and snacks look like.
2. Timing is everything—Feed young kids five to eight meals and snacks per day. It's important to note that while I serve my child properly proportioned meals, she takes what she wants from them. I put it in front of her; she chooses what and how much to eat. When she reaches adulthood, she will have established a pattern of eating and she will know what comprises a proper meal or snack.
3. Automate—Think of food shopping, prep, planning and even some cooking on rest days from workouts. This is most likely easier for parents who are also doing the WODs. Once you start to realize that much of your life is actually quite well organized on the three-days-on, one-day-off CrossFit rhythm, having and eating good food is just easier to deal with in general. Using rest days in this way makes sense in terms of food storage, whether you are responsible for others or live by yourself and can focus solely on your own training goals (I am so envious).

Get good with notions like portable food. Get good at prepping it, packing it and toting it. Redefine what "leftovers" are and rethink what "breakfast" means. Until the mainstream catches up, you are not going to find healthy, balanced nutritious meals in too many places outside your own kitchen.
4. Admit imperfection—Cheat small. As a general rule of thumb for child-rearing in general, don't do something once unless you are prepared to repeat it 15,000 times. We have "Candy Day" on Saturday so, clearly, I am prepared to have it until the end of time. Perhaps the purest of readers will recoil at this, but I can easily quantify the sugar in two pieces of candy and live with it. The forbidden-fruit argument doesn't fly; Saturday is Candy Day. But if you're going to cheat, do it small and get back on track. This is part of life. At the same time, teach your children that sugar is as deadly an addictive substance as cigarettes, and they'll get it.

5. Stay open minded—Whatever bad food habit you and your family have that you all just cannot give up is likely the very thing you should. Kids will eat what's in front of them; they will not starve themselves. They likely can't go for very long at all if they're CrossFitting. Withhold the Ding Dongs in favor of real food. Don't think, "My kid will never go for that." There is always opportunity for your children to surprise you.
6. Know your food fingerprint—For families who are doing well but want to do better, consider investing some time in knowing your own food fingerprint. We human beings have so much DNA in common, yet our bodies are subtly different from one another. Consider in this context these comments from two rather different sources. Physician William Osler (1849-1919) noted, "Variability is the law of life, and as no two faces are the same, so no two bodies are alike, and no two individuals react alike and behave alike under the abnormal conditions which we know as disease" (2). The other is from Hippocrates (460-370 BCE): "Let food be thy medicine, and medicine thy food."

In order to embody these notions, you have to know yourself very well. In adults, you must moderate and balance your diet and go through the process of understanding if you have any sensitivities to food substances. Only then can you begin to tweak your diet with a view to enhancing your performance. Every single person owes it to himself or herself to figure out a personal food fingerprint. The human condition is such that good nutrition is foundational to our entire lives. Food either makes or breaks you.

7. Change is good. Good changes take time—For older children and other 70-year-olds for whom poor nutritional habits have become entrenched, recognize that real change is built on incremental growth. Good things take time, so play the long game. For those who feel overwhelmed at the prospect of changing ingrained bad habits, I grant you change is sometimes difficult. Consider that feeding a child is a very different enterprise than feeding yourself. You are free to make decisions with respect to your own care and feeding, but your children are not. They don't have the agency, means and support to make food choices, to buy food, and to prepare, cook or serve it. Remember, you're one meal away.



Yes, children will eat this.

Start with: water. Every day. Fish oil. Every day. Eat protein, at every meal, and eat it in balance with favorable carbs and favorable fat. Increase valuable foods (these would be high on the Aggregate Nutritional Density Index and “functional foods”) and decrease those high on the Glycemic Index.

Choose Wisely

In my experience, there are a great many people who will tell you what you should and should not put in your child’s mouth, but you are the only person who will be making that decision. Remember that how we eat, what we eat and how we prepare it are all learned behaviors: what our parents fed to us is what we learn of feeding ourselves.

How great would it be if young athletes reached adulthood and realized they’ve had optimal nutrition for the performance of their entire lives?

References

1. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease. Diets. Available at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/diets.html>. Accessed Feb. 27, 2012.
2. Osler W. Address to the New Haven Medical Association (Jan. 6, 1903). Published as “On the educational value of the medical society.” *Yale Medical Journal*, 9(10): 325, 1903.



About the Author

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