

Columns

Children need hygienic feeding

Source:: Daily News Saturday

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Date: 22.04.2006

LAST week I took a comprehensive look at children's most common traits of behaviour and dropped hints on how best to influence these traits. In fact, it takes a good parent to make a good child.

Well-groomed children cannot lob stones at nesting bees or toy with live electric sockets. I said that encouraging young children to play and explore helps them learn and develop socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually. Of course, we all know that children play because it is fun. But play is also a crucial aspect for their learning and development requirements.

A close look at children at play is likely to reveal that playing builds their knowledge and experience and helps develop their curiosity and confidence. Children learn by trying things, comparing results, asking questions and meeting challenges. Adults learn in similar ways.

For children aged above three years play develops their language skills faster. Play also challenges a child to think, plan, organise and even make a decision. For a child who has a disability, stimulation and play are important. But children must be fed very well if they must grow well.

I must insist at the outset that all babies must be breastfed. Breastfeeding helps protect infants and young children against dangerous illnesses. It also creates a special bond between mother and child. In fact, breast-milk is the baby's "first immunisation."

Paediatricians say breast-milk helps to protect against diarrhoea, ear and chest infections and other health problems. The protection is greatest when breast-milk alone is given for the first six months.

However, breastfeeding must continue well into the second year and even beyond. No other drinks or foods can provide this protection. Drinking water should not be given to infants before they are six months old. Breastfed babies usually get more attention and stimulation than those who are left to feed themselves with bottles. Attention helps infants grow and develop well and feel more secure.

Paediatricians determine that unclean feeding bottles and teats can cause illnesses such as diarrhoea and ear infections. Diarrhoea can be deadly for babies and young children. Illness is less likely to set in if the bottles and teats are sterilised in boiling water before each feed.

However, bottle-fed babies are still far more susceptible to diarrhoea and other common infections than breastfed babies. The best food for a baby who cannot be breastfed is milk expressed from the mother's breast or from another healthy mother.

The breast-milk should be given from a clean, open cup. Even newborn babies can be fed with an open cup, which can be easily cleaned. The best food for any baby whose own mother's milk is not available is the breast-milk of another healthy mother.

If breast-milk is not available, a nutritionally adequate breast-milk substitute should be fed to the baby by cup. Infants who are fed breast-milk substitutes are at greater risk of death and disease than breastfed infants.

Feeding the baby breast-milk substitutes can cause poor growth or illness if too much or too little water is added or the water is not clean. It is important to boil and then cool the water and carefully follow the directions of mixing breast-milk substitutes.

Animal's milk and infant formula go bad if left at room temperature for a few hours. Breast-milk can be stored for up to eight hours at room temperature without going bad. Although children need additional foods after they are six months old, breast-milk is still an important source of energy.

Breast-milk also provides protein and other nutrients such as vitamin A and iron. It helps protect against disease for as long as the child breastfeeds. From the age of six months to one year, breastfeeding should be offered before other foods, to be sure the infant takes plenty of milk every day.

The child's diet should include peeled, cooked and mashed vegetables, grains, pulses and fruit, according to nutritionists. It should also include some oil, fish, eggs, chicken, meat or dairy products to provide vitamins and minerals.

In the second year, breastfeeding should be offered after meals and at other times. A mother can continue to breastfeed her child for as long as she and the child wishes. Children aged six to 12 months should be breastfed frequently and given other foods three to five times a day.

The child should be allowed to breastfeed each time he or she demands. It should be noted that children need to eat more frequently than adults. From 12 to 24 months of age a child should be allowed to breastfeed as frequently as he or she wishes and be given family foods five times a day.

It should be noted here that the number of feeds increase as the age of the child advances. From 24 months of age onwards the child can continue to breastfeed if both the mother and child wish. The child should continue to eat family foods five or even six times a day.

Babies fall ill frequently as they begin to crawl, walk, play, drink and eat foods other than breast-milk. A sick child needs plenty of breast-milk. Breast-milk is a nutritious, easily digestible food when a child loses appetite for other foods. Breastfeeding can comfort a child who is upset.

If a mother cannot be with her baby during working hours, she should breastfeed often when she reunites with the baby. Frequent breastfeeding will ensure her milk supply. If a woman cannot breastfeed at her workplace, she should express her milk two or three times during the day and save it in a clean container.

Breast-milk can be stored for up to eight hours at room temperature without going bad. The more often a baby breastfeeds, the longer it will take for the mother's menstrual periods to resume. If a mother breastfeeds less than eight times in 24 hours or gives other foods, the baby may breastfeed less often.

This is likely to cause the mother's menstrual periods to resume sooner. However, it should be noted that it is possible for a mother to become pregnant before her periods return. This becomes increasingly likely six months after birth.

A woman should choose a good method of family planning when her periods resume or once her baby reaches the age of six months. It is good for the health of the mother and her children if she avoids becoming pregnant again until her youngest child is more than two years old.

A health worker or trained birth attendant should give all new parents family planning advice.

Most methods of postponing pregnancy have no effect on the quality of the breast-milk. However, some contraceptive pills contain oestrogen, which can reduce the quantity of breast-milk.

Trained health workers can provide advice about the best kind of contraception for a breast-feeding mother. Before I lay down my pen I wish to remind parents not to give water to infants who are less than six months old. This practice that often endangers the health of infants. Good Luck.

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