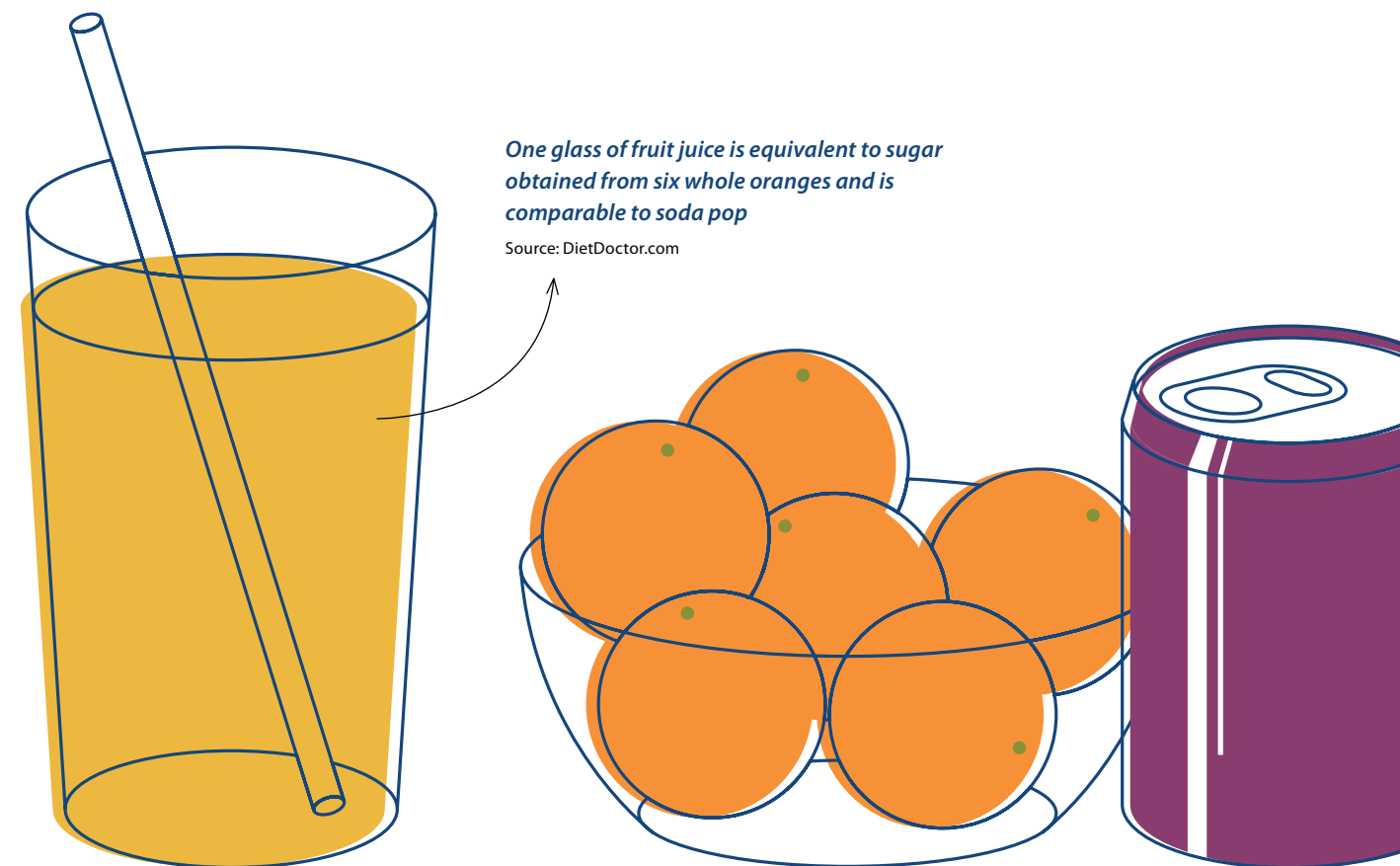
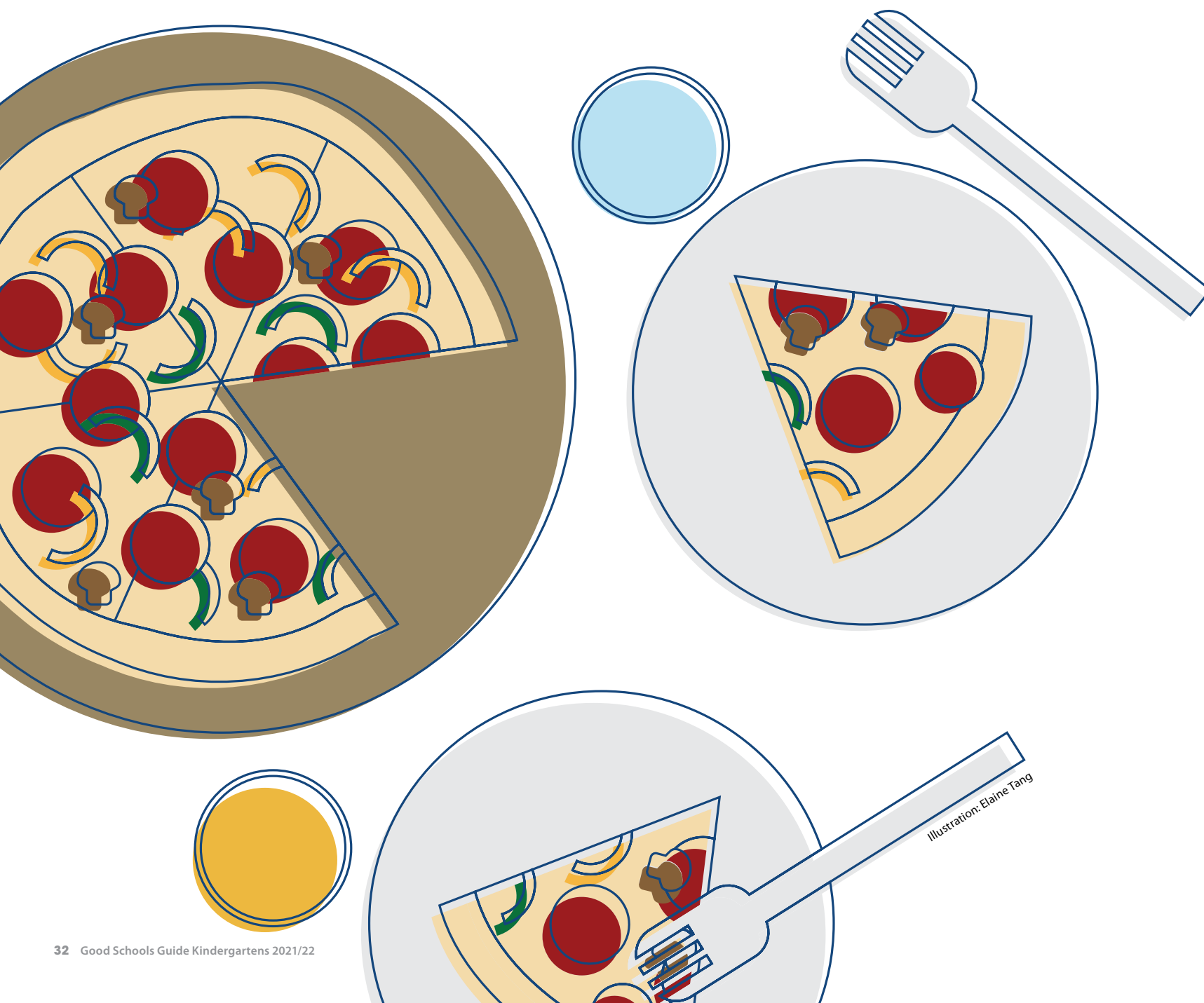


WHAT'S ON YOUR CHILD'S PLATE?

They say you are what you eat, so what should you be feeding your little ones to give them the best start possible in life? By **Sarah Engstrand**



One glass of fruit juice is equivalent to sugar obtained from six whole oranges and is comparable to soda pop

Source: DietDoctor.com

Breakfast, lunch and dinner. To most, they are simply mealtimes: a few moments to sit down and nourish oneself before getting back to the day. But for parents of kindergarteners, they are battlegrounds. Around the table, tears are shed (by adults and children alike) over things as mundane as chicken nuggets or carrot medallions.

We all know about the terrible twos, but why does no one talk about the fitful fives and the stroppy sixes? Kids might learn the word “no” at two, but they perfect it at five, developing finely tuned skills of negotiation, balancing their own desires against yours – especially when it comes to food.

But the kindergarten years are among the most crucial stages in a child's development, and a good diet is essential for them to grow big and strong. So, queue up *Eye of the Tiger* and get ready to go to battle in the name of healthy nutrition.

“Growing children have extreme nutrition needs because they're building their bodies,” explains Oliver Smith, a kinesiologist, ketogenic diet specialist and clinical nutritionist at Kinesiology Asia.

Of course, strong bones and muscles are important, but the most vital development is of the brain. And a healthy brain needs fats, ideally via healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

Though he is passionate about the benefits of a ketogenic diet, Smith prefers to focus on whole food when it comes to children. He tells his young clients that their bodies are like a house, and to build a beautiful house you need strong bricks (proteins and minerals) and builders (energy, like carbohydrates and fats).

What the house doesn't need is over-processed and sugary foods, which can disrupt healthy growth and lead to childhood obesity and other illnesses.

Tiffany Shek, a clinical nutritionist with her own eponymous practice, warns that childhood obesity is linked to adult obesity. “It's a vicious cycle we want to break early. We want to educate children so we can help them live a healthier and happier life.”

It's not easy. Small people have small stomachs, and it can be difficult to gauge how much a child should be eating, especially when they are protesting every other bite. Shek tells her clients to think of food portions in terms of everyday objects, such as rice bowls and ping pong balls. For a healthy child of five, she recommends between 1.5 and three rice bowls of starchy foods, at least one portion of fruit, 1.5 rice bowls of vegetables, and three ping-pong balls' worth of protein a day.

On top of that, they should have two servings of calcium for strong bones and teeth. Shek recommends full-fat milk or non-dairy alternatives with added calcium. Hydration is also important, and children should drink between four and five glasses of fluids a day.

When choosing snacks and food options, do not be fooled by healthy-looking labels. Sugar makes up nearly 74 per cent of most packaged foods. In the United States, this has resulted in people consuming a staggering 17 teaspoons of added sugar a day, just from processed foods alone. Just one 350ml can of regular Coca-Cola can contain up to 10 teaspoons of sugar. And there's another culprit lurking in the kitchen: fruit juices. Some have almost as much sugar as soda pop.

"A lot of parents think that juice is healthy and a good substitute for fruit," says Shek who describes it as "sugar in liquid form". But it's not. Both experts agree it is best to offer whole fruit for the full benefits of vitamins, minerals and fibre.

"Sugar is basically a drug," says Smith. The more [children] have it, the more they crave it, and when you take it away, there can even be withdrawal-type symptoms. It usually takes between two and three days to detox, though he cautions that some children can "go absolutely crazy".

It is no surprise that this can affect behaviour, too. At a time when most children are just starting school, a child's diet can make a world of difference. "When they're starting to learn,

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74% of products in the US food supply contain caloric or low-calorie sweeteners, or both. Of those, only 2% are low-calorie sweeteners

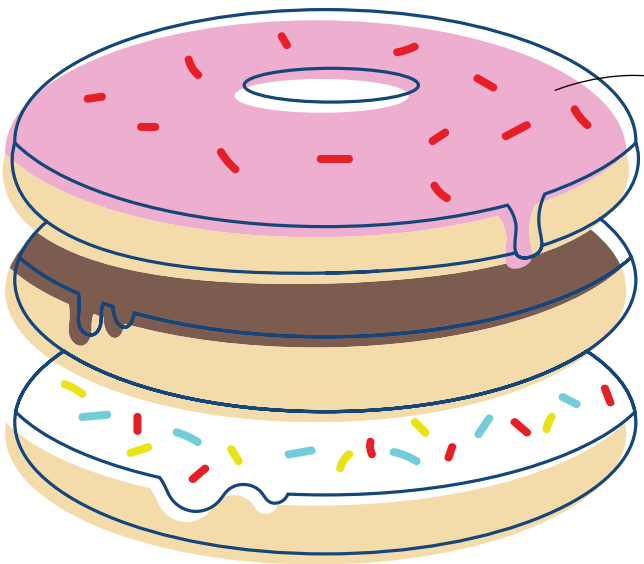
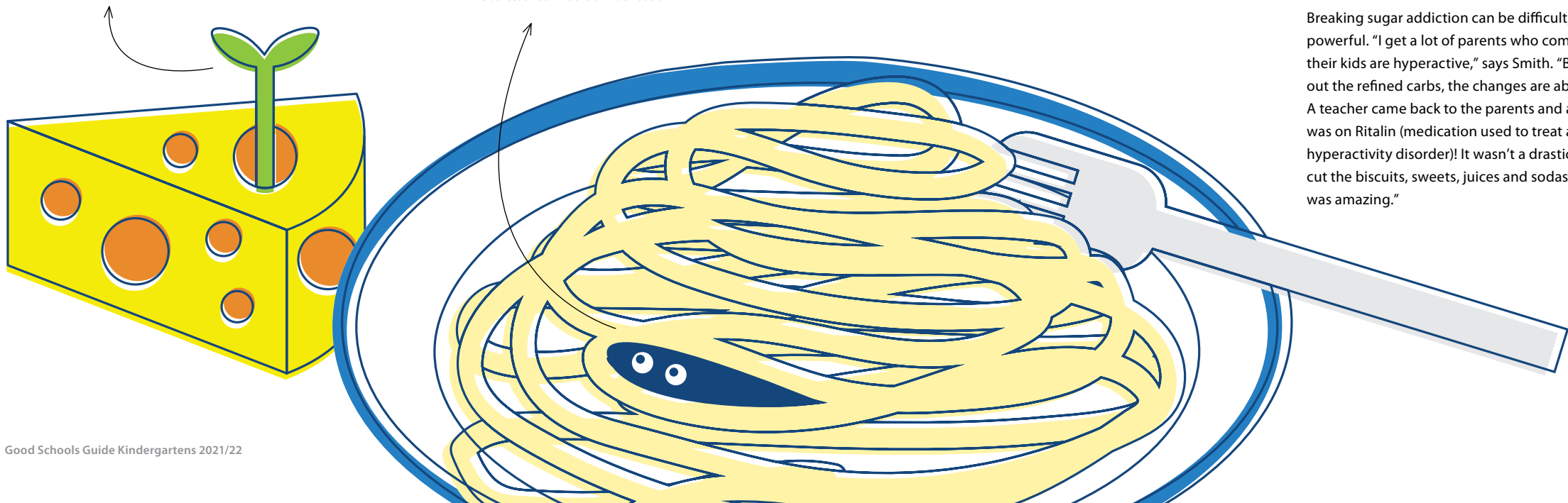
Source: The Lancet

One in three primary school children thinks cheese comes from plants

Source: British Nutrition Foundation

34% of children between the ages of five and eight believe pasta comes from animals

Source: British Nutrition Foundation



Ultra-processed foods contributed to 65% of total energy intake and 92% of energy from added sugars in the diet of American children

Source: Pediatric Obesity (Journal of World Obesity)

their learning curve is so steep. If you have too much sugar and empty calories, it can become hard [for them] to focus," notes Shek.

The easiest way to wean your little ones off sugar is to find healthy sweet substitutes. In a keto-obsessed world, it is easy to find pre-packaged alternatives to cookies and sweets. But a healthier option is to make your own. Smith recommends replacing wheat flour with almond flour ("this takes out a lot of the carbs and they have a totally different nutritional profile") and incorporating natural sugars that do not affect the glycemic index, such as stevia and erythritol. To keep things simple, just try a piece a fruit or yogurt drizzled with honey. "You don't have to be too strict on the sugar. It depends on the child, but generally a teaspoon or so is enough," says Shek.

Breaking sugar addiction can be difficult, but the results are powerful. "I get a lot of parents who come to see me because their kids are hyperactive," says Smith. "But when they cut out the refined carbs, the changes are absolutely amazing. A teacher came back to the parents and asked if their son was on Ritalin (medication used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)! It wasn't a drastic change – they just cut the biscuits, sweets, juices and sodas – but the effect was amazing."

There is a big caveat here, and it is life. Smith is careful not to tell patients to cut sugars and refined carbs out completely. For a typical child, without special dietary needs, he takes a simple approach: "Control what you can and if there are a few slips along the way, that's OK."

If your kid comes home bursting with energy and crashes an hour later, it's a good opportunity to open a dialogue. Ask them how they feel, and use the time to teach them to check in with their own body. They may notice a slight stomach ache or that they are a bit cranky. "With kids, it's not about making them feel restrained or different, especially with their friends. You want to empower them."

And, of course, when it comes to a healthy diet, fruits and vegetables are necessary. Anyone with a kindergartener knows that greens are pretty much public enemy number one. But it is up to the adults to push through the resistance and provide a child with a healthy, balanced diet.

"Expose them to as many colours as possible and tell them to eat the 'rainbow' (an assortment of colourful vegetables and fruits)," advises Shek. And don't be deterred if they reject something. Studies have shown that persistence is key. Keep incorporating vegetables into their diet in creative ways, even if you must hide them in sauces and burger patties.

It can even be fun – yes, really. Take them to the local wet market and try to find produce in every colour. Then take it home and cook together, they will be more interested in eating new foods this way. Smith also encourages families to go to farms and learn where food comes from: "There was a survey published a few years ago that showed kids are completely disconnected with food. They thought fish fingers were a type of fish!" ■