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Feed your children well

A University of Illinois food-science professor should be lauded for her work in developing baby food that contains essential omega-3 fatty acids derived from salmon, a product that could help children develop a taste for fish early on.

Do you remember the first time you ate seafood? Or, more importantly, the first time you loved it?

Tuna-fish sandwiches regularly appeared in my lunch boxes as a young boy, yet it was that bowl of full-bellied fried clams on a warm summer evening at the local fish fry that got me excited to eat seafood way back when. Alas, seafood in general was not a staple during my childhood — nor is it for many kids today, either because of high costs or fussy taste buds. Getting kids to eat fish can be a chore.

Children should, however, be eating fish regularly, and a University of Illinois food-science professor is doing what she can to get parents to serve their young kids more nutritious foods, like salmon, at an early age.

Susan Brewer, who's also a registered dietitian, says parents can do their kids a favor by turning them on to fish before their food preferences are fully set, which she says starts to happen by age 5. It's the extremely beneficial long-chain omega-3 fatty acids — found only in fish — that will set the next generation on the path to healthy lives.

“A lot of parents already know about omega-3 fatty acids, which is in a lot of infant formulas. We can produce small amounts in our bodies but babies are not able to convert the precursor into omega-3s and they have a much greater need for them than [adults] do,” said Brewer, who developed a baby food product — Sweet Potatoes and Salmon — that was eventually produced and marketed by Beech Nut. “Mothers produce [omega-3s] in their breast milk. But as soon as they stop feeding, it can go out the window.”

Brewer's research paper on including salmon roe in baby food products was published in the May issue of the *Journal of Food Science* and she has another research paper due to appear in an upcoming issue. That one will recap her work utilizing pink salmon products (supplied by Seattle's Ocean Beauty Seafoods) and will also highlight a consumer-acceptability study her team conducted, a report that should bear promising results.

For the past few years of baby food R&D, Brewer collaborated with Peter Bechtel of Alaska's Agricultural Research Service (and a former University of Illinois professor), which is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. “It's a wonderful product from a nutritional standpoint,” said Bechtel, adding that the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation deserves a lot of credit for “pushing the ball forward” on the baby food research.

Brewer and Bechtel both said baby foods containing fish are quite common in Europe and Asia but not in the United States, which has a much lower per-capita seafood consumption rate of just 16 pounds annually.

So will salmon baby food ever catch on stateside?

"I think the potential is really good," said Brewer. "But it's going to require some education aimed at parents. It's hard to get people to feed stuff to their kids that they don't eat [themselves]."

I'm reminded of a conversation I had recently with [Kate Geagan](#), MS, RD, who was the subject of the NetWorking interview in the April issue of SeaFood Business. The author of "Go Green Get Lean: Trim Your Waistline with the Ultimate Low-Carbon Footprint Diet" told me that she got her two young children eating fish by their first birthdays.

"Don't think kids will only eat fish sticks; there's a lot of other things out there," she said, adding that her kids love mild flaky whitefish like barramundi. "I think fish can be a food for the high chair. Most parents don't introduce kids to seafood until they're much older. But the texture of a flaky fish pulled apart and deboned is very easy for little mouths and helps them set their palate."

It's likely to be quite an uphill climb to get baby food manufacturers to give seafood a fair shot. But considering the myriad health benefits and emerging research on omega-3s, it would be their mistake not to.

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Published: Wednesday, August 25, 2010

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