

Colour my world

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While the bright hues may be alluring, be careful not to judge a food by its colour...

You've probably seen claims of 'no colours' and 'no artificial additives' on all sorts of food packaging, because colourings are one of 'those things' in food that get parents' hackles up. They're regarded as unnecessary cosmetic additions used for eye appeal only.

And the urban myths abound – red cordial sends kids into hyperactive overdrive, while green lollies can give them eczema and hives. Parties that are helped along by cakes with icing, sweets, iceblocks and sugary drinks are destined to be a nightmare.

But this is not a new development, because artificial colours have long been under suspicion. For kids with food sensitivities, Australia's best-known Allergy Unit, located at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney, advises to avoid all of them. The red food dye Erythrosine (additive code number 127) is now restricted and, since 1997, its use is limited to colouring maraschino cherries. Tartrazine (102), which is used to impart a yellow hue, is suspected to provoke asthma, urticaria (hives) and mood changes in food-sensitive people. Sunset yellow FCF (110), Amaranth (123) and Brilliant blue FCF (133) are also under a cloud as being potentially carcinogenic or triggers for food intolerance reactions ranging from bad behaviour and wakefulness at night to skin rashes.

Yet we can't live without colour, it seems. Colour reflects flavour, and we can all relate to the sentiment of 'eating with our eyes'. No child would be happy with lollies that were flavoured but colourless, or fizzy drinks that all looked clear. Homemade lemonade, with its subtle lemon-yellow look, looks different to store-bought lemonade.

A natural progression

It's a controversial issue. Fortunately, the list of permitted colours in Australia and New Zealand is more restricted than those overseas. Like other additives, the safety of food colours is evaluated by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and its expert advisory groups. Approved colours can be either natural or artificial and they can be identified on food labels by their chemical name, such as Brilliant blue FCF, or their code number (133).

Natural colours are part of a worldwide trend away from processed foods and towards 'all-natural', cleaner ingredients. It's spurring food manufacturers to source their colours from pure juice concentrates or natural sources, according to global analyst firm Frost & Sullivan.

And the result of this shift can be seen on the labels of our favourite foods. Kids' lollies are now made red with Carmines derived from Cochineal (120), Annatto extracts (160b), Beet red (162) or cherry juice extract, instead of the more suspect red number 122 (Azorubine), or number 129 (Allura red AC). Yellow and orange hues are derived from the beta-carotene of carrots or pumpkin, Curcumin (100) from tumeric or paprika. Purple tones come from Anthocyanins (163) found in grape skin extract,

CATERING FOR KIDS

Letting the little ones indulge their sweet tooth isn't necessarily naughty

Natural confectionery is booming after its makeover, and sales of lollies made with natural colours and flavours and no preservatives are high. So successful are the sweets from The Natural Confectionery Company that it's released a range of fizzy drinks in fruity flavours. "It was a big hit with mums who wanted to give their children a soft drink treat but were seeking products that had no artificial colours, flavour and preservatives," says Rachael Edginton, spokesperson for the company. In the end, all-natural foods help us feel we're doing something to help us eat right.

elderberry or red cabbage, and browns from a number of Caramels (150a-d).

This trends parallels the general rise of farmers' markets, organic fare and less-processed products. It's part of the huge swing to healthier options, identified as one of top ten global food trends by US trends tracker Elizabeth Sloan in the April issue of *Food Technology*. And with the trend taking such a broad scope, it's safe to assume what's good for the kids is probably good for mum and dad, too. **H&G**

