

[IMAGE]

The ABCs of Nutrition

By Claudia Anrig, DC

While school lunch programs have begun to address the issue of nutrition, lunch lines across the country still provide pizza, Sloppy Joes, cheeseburgers, corn dogs and other high-fat, nutrient-deficient items. It's time to teach our children there's a healthier way to eat.

Most parents recognize the importance of feeding their children nutritious foods. The problem is that in most schools, cafeteria food just doesn't cut it, and most parents don't exactly pack the ideal foods for their children to take to school every day. Between a busy family schedule, the picky eating habits of your children, and the ever-increasing array of unhealthy products marketed specifically to children, you may be losing the battle to provide your children with sound nutrition. Here are a few easy suggestions on how to improve their daily diet at school and at home.

Sandwich Suggestions

Parents purchasing white bread often equate "enriched" with healthy. Not true: White bread goes through a bleaching process that removes most of the nutrients. That's why it's white. Parents then combine this nutrient-deficient bread with something equally as unhealthy; peanut butter (most brands contain hydrogenated oil) and jelly (which often contains processed sugar), processed meats (almost all of which are filled with chemicals) and cheeses (often a processed food instead of the real thing).

- Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark A better sandwich suggestion includes whole-grain bread, natural almond butter and unsweetened jelly, baked or roasted meats, and sliced vegetables (cucumbers, red peppers, etc.). Don't forget some sprinkles of flax seed. Another great sandwich option is a "wrap." This can be done by purchasing whole-grain or gluten-free tortillas and wrapping up healthier protein and vegetable sources. For example, start with baked turkey or chicken and add any or all of the following: cucumbers, sprouts, red peppers, hummus or a handful of beans. These choices are a definite improvement over what most children consume during their lunch hour.

Pack It Right

Part of putting together a healthy packed lunch is having the right storage containers. Be sure to use an insulated lunch box that will hold up to four small food containers and a thermos. When purchasing lunch containers, consider purchasing at least two sets; this will eliminate the hassle of having to wash them each night. As for the thermos, be sure it is the wide-mouth variety, which can be used for many purposes (drinks, soup, etc.).

Water Is Best

When it comes to healthy lunches, milk, juice and soda should be avoided whenever possible. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, juice consumption contributes to cavities and gastrointestinal issues in children. Many health authorities believe milk plays a role in childhood allergies. So, what should they drink? The best choice is water in a stainless steel container. That way, you're promoting "green" and at the same time saving money by not using plastic bottles.

Easy Entrées

Cubes of baked chicken, turkey or tofu are all great sources of protein that can be packed in a small lunch container. Limit processed meats (some children develop allergies, headaches and behavioral problems from the chemicals in processed meats) and plan ahead when making dinner. Leftovers can be cut into bite-sized pieces and eaten as finger food. A hard-boiled egg is also a great source of protein.

That wide-mouth thermos can bring great variety to an average lunch. Chili beans (another great source of protein) with organic tortilla chips for dipping can break up a boring lunch routine. At home, start to prepare homemade soups and stew, which will help steer your children away from the chemicals and high salt content found in many store-bought brands.

Healthy Sides

One of the side dishes we need to encourage kids to enjoy is green vegetables (snap peas, broccoli, zucchini slices, etc). Don't forget to expand the color spectrum (squash, red and yellow bell peppers) to include the antioxidant family. Introduce a healthy dip like hummus. You can also find healthy vegetable-based dips in whole/health food stores and major chain stores.

Fruit is also a great side dish, but try to avoid fruit cups and processed roll-ups. Your child's lunch will be much healthier if it includes sliced or chopped organic fruit topped with shredded coconut, raisins or raw

nuts instead of processed snacks.

Consider putting together a grain salad - for example, couscous or steamed, long-grain brown rice with chopped cucumbers, red peppers, baby carrots or a similar vegetable. Marinate the chopped vegetables in a salad dressing for a few days prior to preparing the salad. Drain the vegetables and then mix them in. This will add moisture to the salad, reducing the need to add excess dressing.

Create a Menu

Your children know better than you do what they're going to want for lunch, so it's important to let them participate actively in the selection and preparation of their lunches. When children are included in the process, they are more likely to finish what they started.

As a parent, where do you begin? Start by committing to only healthy lunch choices. This might involve spending a few hours with your children at a bookstore or library, or searching on the Web. What are you looking for? Cookbooks and other resources that focus on whole/natural menus for kids. Then develop a planning board so your children can mix-and-match their lunch menu for the week.

Using a white board, poster board or something similar, draw out five columns and label them for each day of the week. Using color-coded Post-It notes, index cards or colored paper, create a square for each lunch option. For example, put protein options on blue cards/paper, vegetable options on green, fruits on yellow and snacks on pink.

Each weekend, let your children select from each of the food cards and build a five-day lunch menu for the upcoming school week. Remember that while this is being done, the entire family can begin preparing and prepackaging some of the choices that can be frozen or stored for a few days. When Monday rolls around, you'll be ready to go with healthy options for your kids' lunches!

You Are the Teacher

It's important to remember *you* have to be your child's advocate when it comes to eating healthier lunches. If we let this meal go to the "waste side," we are not only losing another opportunity for children to grow up healthy with the necessary building blocks, but also missing the opportunity to teach them that each meal counts and can have great taste appeal.

- - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Whole-wheat and other whole-grain breads provide dietary fiber, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals.
 - Leafy green vegetables are typically low in calories and high in dietary fiber, iron, calcium and phytochemicals.
 - Tomatoes, yellow peppers and other brightly colored vegetables are packed with antioxidants.
 - Modest amounts of lean meat provide essential protein. Avoid processed meats and try meatless substitutes.
 - Cheese and other dairy products contain protein and calcium. As with meat, avoid processed cheeses and experiment with nondairy substitutes.
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