

[IMAGE]

Healthy Back-to-School Lunches

By Dr. Claudia Anrig

As parents begin the annual back-to-school scramble for clothes, supplies and other school essentials, many will overlook one of the most important necessities for the school year - healthy lunches. It's common knowledge that despite attempts to improve the state of affairs, the school cafeteria is essentially just another franchise; with limited exception and despite facing increasing scrutiny, school cafeteria foods aren't healthy and well-balanced. Chicken fingers, pizza and refined (white) bread, rice and pasta just don't cut it when it comes to good nutrition, and these types of foods are prevalent in school cafeterias frequented by 5-year-olds to 17-year-olds. And what's more, vending machines offer chips, cookies, sodas and all kinds of other junk foods that children shouldn't be eating, certainly not without parental supervision.

This unhealthy environment has created a challenge for parents that many have decided to ignore, whether by design or just because they lack the time and energy to pay closer attention. Many parents rationalize that the rest of their children's meals are healthy and nutritious, so they can be lax regarding school meals. This is a misconception, especially if you consider not only what is being served in the majority of school cafeterias, but also that most kids are at school for at least a half a day and up to a full day, depending on their age.

What's Being Served?

Healthy Back-to-School Lunches - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Although programs have begun to appear over the past few years addressing the problem, the fact is that not much has changed. The majority of entrees served on school campuses include pizza, Sloppy Joes, cheeseburgers, spaghetti, hot dogs and corn dogs. It's rare that you will see anything made with fish and chicken, unless it's fish sticks and chicken nuggets, which contain processed meat that is breaded and deep fried. This is just not nutritious. It's time to accept the fact that raising healthier children means they won't be eating school lunches, but instead will need to be provided lunch from home. Here are some suggestions for how even the busiest parents can do it.

Perfect Packing

Part of putting together a healthy packed lunch is having the right storage containers. After all, you want your child to look forward to eating their meal. If foods that are intended to be cold end up warm by lunchtime, and/or if their lunch box is overflowing with items that fall out as soon as they open it up, children will quickly be turned off. Be sure to use an insulated lunch box that will hold up to four small food containers and a thermos. When purchasing the containers, you should buy at least two sets; this will help you to avoid having to wash a them each night. As for the thermos, be sure that it is the wide-mouth variety; this will allow for a wider variety of foods to accompany your child to school.

The Beverage

When it comes to healthy lunches, milk, juice and soda should be avoided at all cost. The American Academy of Pediatrics says that juice consumption is contributing to cavities and gastrointestinal issues for children, while milk has proven to be a common food allergen. Your best option is to encourage your child to drink water. This can be done by providing water for them in their lunch box using a stainless-steel thermos or by placing ice cubes in their thermos in the morning. By lunchtime, they will have begun to melt and, in the meantime, they will have helped to keep the other items in the lunch box nice and cold.

The Entree

Great sources of protein that can be put in a small lunch container are cubes of baked chicken, turkey or fish. This does not include processed meat that you buy at your grocery store, but should be prepared at home and cut into bite-size pieces. Remember that you can freeze these in small portions and use them randomly over the course of several weeks. A hard-boiled egg is also a great source of protein. And don't forget that wide-mouth thermos; beans are an excellent source of protein and can be served in a thermos with organic tortilla chips for dipping. Alternatives to beans include meat or vegetarian chili or stew. If these options seem like a hard sell to your child, it probably means you're not including them in their daily diet at home. Perhaps it's time to evaluate your child's diet to make sure they're getting exposed to a wide variety of healthy foods. This will give you a wider variety of foods to choose from when packing their lunch.

A Note About the Traditional Sandwich

Commonly found in the packed lunch is a sandwich; the problem is that bad choices can be made here as well. White bread bought at the store contains bleached flour. And don't be fooled by the word "enriched," as adding back a portion of the vitamins removed during the bleaching process doesn't undo the damage.

Better sandwich choices include whole-wheat bread with a lot of grains, and almond butter instead of peanut butter. And be creative. Try to put vegetables into a sandwich as much as possible. If your children "don't like vegetables," stick with it. Sometimes it's just a phase, and the more exposure they get (and choices), the greater the chance they'll surprise you.

Another great sandwich option is a healthy wrap. This can be done by purchasing whole-grain tortillas and wrapping up healthier protein and vegetable sources. For instance, baked turkey or chicken with lettuce, cucumbers, sprouts, red peppers - maybe even some beans sprinkled inside make a tasty protein.

The Side Dishes

Healthy Back-to-School Lunches - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Most children don't consider lunch complete unless there are chips and cookies. These must be avoided at all cost; chips and cookies are an occasional treat, not a lunch staple. The side dishes for your children should be tasty cut vegetables, keeping in mind that greener is better.

Fruit is also a great side dish, but while it is healthy, it is also a source of sugar and not as rich in vitamins and minerals as vegetables. Try to serve fruit just once for every five servings of vegetables. Remember that it should be fresh, organically grown fruit, not processed "substitutes." Fruit roll-ups are not fruit.

Invite your child to help you prepare vegetable soup or vegetarian chili. These can be put in a thermos and taken to school over the span of a week.

Consider putting together a grain salad. This can include couscous or steamed long-grain brown rice with chopped cucumbers, red peppers, baby carrots, or any other similar vegetable. You may also choose to 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 without having to add excess dressing.

Going Organic

Organically grown foods are slightly more expensive, but worth it. Providing foods that are free of pesticides, growth hormones, hydrogenated oils and artificial additives and preservatives is worth the price. Non-organic foods are generally less expensive, but in many cases they also lack nutrition. You're paying less, but you're also getting less in return.

Create a Menu

No one knows better than your own child what they're going to eat, so let them help you prepare their lunches. Remember that if they like what they're eating, they will bring home an empty lunch box. The best way to accomplish this is to ensure that they have a variety of healthy choices. This can be accomplished by creating a mix-and-match menu. Using a white board, poster board or similar display, draw out five columns and label them for each day of the week. Then, using color-coded Post-it notes, index cards or by printing on colored paper, create a square for each lunch option. For example, their protein options would be on blue, vegetables would be on green and fruits would be on yellow.

Every Sunday, let your child help you prepare their menu by picking the appropriate cards and placing them in the column for each day. You and your child can then begin prepackaging those options that can be frozen or stored for a few days. Remember, children love to participate, so let them in on the lunch-making fun and you'll increase their chances of eating the food they bring to school.

It's important that your children like their lunches, but it's more important that their bodies get the vitamins, minerals and nutrients they need to develop and grow properly. A balanced diet is more than just a healthy recommendation; it is the building blocks of your child's body. The food they are given is what their bodies will use to make new cells, membranes, muscles and tissue.

Don't Assume They Won't Like It

While children can certainly be picky about food, particularly at certain developmental stages, too many parents assume that their children won't eat something that's healthy compared to something that's not. That might be the case the first, second or even third time around, but gentle persistence can definitely have an impact.

kids eating lunch - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Remember, children (and people in general) learn from what they are exposed to over time - expose them to healthier food options and eventually,

they'll embrace a healthier diet. Keep in mind that the longer they've been exposed to less-healthy choices, the harder it could be to change their eating habits, so start making small changes today. Introduce new foods to the family diet as often as possible and don't give up just because they react negatively at first. Find a few good foods they do like and recognize that the more healthy foods they consume, the less room they've have for the unhealthy ones!

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