

PACKING SCHOOL LUNCHES FOR ELEMENTARY CHILDREN

Breakfast may be considered the most important meal of the day, but lunch plays a critical role in a child's school performance and health. So how can you get your child to eat a balanced lunch at school to keep their mind focused and their energy level stable?

Put your child in the chef seat. When kids assist with packing their own lunch, they are more likely to eat it.

Take your child to the grocery store and make some good choices together. Take small steps in ceasing to purchase prepared and processed foods that contain unwanted sugars and sodium. You can "wean" your children onto healthier food choices. You may remember being raised on whole milk and you made the choice to start drinking skim (nonfat) milk. Most people had to start with reduced fat (2%) milk, then lowfat (1%) milk and eventually skim milk over the course of time in order to tolerate skim milk. These are the same steps that you can take with your children in regards to fat, sodium, and simple sugars. Their taste buds will adjust and eventually the processed foods will taste too sweet or too salty.

Explain that a well balanced lunch (as opposed to the word "healthy" or "nutritious") will give them the energy and thinking power to do their best in school and still be able to enjoy their after school activities.

Set a good example for your children. You need to be eating the foods that you you're your children to eat. Kids may need up to 20 exposures to a food before they accept or like it. It is easier to get your child out of being a picky eater in elementary school than trying to change their eating habits later.

If your child wants to eat the same lunch 2 weeks in a row, don't sweat over it. Stick to keeping the lunch balanced and know that there is plenty of opportunity for your child to get variety at home (breakfast, dinner, and weekends). Kids prefer repetition. If there are only 1 or 2 lunches that they prefer, then don't try and reinvent the wheel by packing a large variety of items that may appeal to you; not them.

Remember that children have different needs than the adult when it comes to fat, calories, carbohydrates, and protein. In addition, your child may be more active, requiring more nutrients and fluids. Make sure the additional nutrients and fluids are provided for in food and beverage items that are nutrient dense (provides a large amount of nutrients for a small amount of calories).

I have found that children enjoy learning about nutrition and helping to make good choices for their families. Try reading food labels together. Please see the following link (the Label Man magnets that I handed out at the PTA meeting list a link that no longer exists)

<http://www.fda.gov/Food/LabelingNutrition/ConsumerInformation/ucm114022.htm>.

Follow the steps for an interactive training session of the Nutrition Facts Label.

Try to provide the following items in every lunch:

- Protein: meat, cheese, nuts, nut butters, eggs, tuna, beans, yogurt. Greek yogurt is quite popular and kids love it. One 6 ounce container of some nonfat Greek yogurts provides 16 grams of protein, 20% daily value for calcium, and 120 calories.
- Grains: breads, crackers, muffins, rolls, tortillas, pita chips or wedges, cereals, pastas. Look for whole grain or whole wheat products that provide at least 2 grams of protein and 3 grams of fiber per serving.
- Fruits and vegetables (try to pack at least one of each): sliced: apples*, oranges, pears*, red/yellow/green peppers, baby carrots, grape tomatoes. *Dip in water with some lemon juice added to prevent browning. Throw in a toothpick and some low-fat ranch dressing, peanut butter, yogurt, fruit sauce. Or hummus for dipping. Place a few slices of romaine lettuce or spinach leaves on a sandwich or a wrap. If you are packing 100% fruit juice, this counts as a fruit.
- Dairy products-children need about 3-8 ounce servings of milk per day. Try sending lowfat milk and add your own flavoring (chocolate syrup) as opposed to buying flavored milk. Look for products that contain 30% of the RDA for calcium on the label. A slice of cheese may only provide 15%, so pack 2 slices. Note: many yogurt beverages do not provide enough calcium per serving-save these as an optional treat.
- Optional Treats: puddings, yogurt drinks, fruit cups, fruited gelatin cups, a bite size candy bar. Some mothers like the 80/20 rule where 80% of the lunch is nutritious and 20% is not so nutritious.

Tired of sandwiches, try wraps, cracker sandwiches, salads with protein, wrap lunch meat around cheese. You can always find an insulated container that you can throw hot leftovers in just prior to your child going to school (these containers usually require you to fill them with hot water, wait a few minutes, toss the water, and then fill with hot food).

Here is a link to a "Cool" Lunch Guide (made available from the Dietitians of Canada) that you can individualize for your child.

http://www.dietitians.ca/child/pdf/Cool_lunch_guide.pdf

GOOD LUCK AND HAVE FUN!