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iBon Appetite! Picking up Where School Lunch Leaves Off

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As the girl walks through the lunch line, the lunch lady asks, "Do you want a vegetable?" "Yes, what do you have?" asks the little girl, her heart set on buttered broccoli. "We have french fries or fried potato skins," she replies, "and don't forget your milk. You can't have lunch without your milk."

The Problem

Researchers stress that a properly balanced diet is one of the big factors of doing well in school. The average active 12-year-old needs about 2,500 calories a day and the brain will use about 500 of those calories just to control the body's functions. There is a problem though when that 12-year-old is getting those calories from sugary treats and products filled with high fructose corn syrup or deep fried in oil. Just eating enough is not the goal—children need to eat right too. To help you help your child eat better, let's look at some myths, frustrations, and truths about school lunches.

Myths



Myth - School lunches provide everything that a child needs to make it through the day.

Don't be so sure! According to the New York Times on the state of America's Cafeteria Cuisine (Becker & Burros, 2003), many school cooks often make foods in fryers just because it is easy. These same schools purchase high-fat surplus goods from the Department of Agriculture. Most of these canned, high-fructose foods can cause hyperactivity in younger children. In addition, most school districts have contracts with fast food vendors that enable students to buy potato chips, candy bars, and sodas. The average child, when given the choice of salad or soda, will always choose soda!



Myth - My kid won't eat healthy food! He only likes to eat junk!

Encourage children to take a role in their own nutrition. Below are some basic hints to get your child to eat healthy foods:

Cook with your child – Teach your child how much fun making food can be. Teach them that by cooking, they can add things to their meals to make them taste better. For example, for a child with a sweet tooth, make a delicious breakfast smoothie with fresh fruit and yogurt. Allow the child to try the smoothie and change the recipe based on his/her own likes.

Model good eating habits – A child learns what to eat by what he/she sees his/her parents eating. A child who sees his/her parents eating nothing but hamburgers and french fries will grow up with the same habit. Slowly add healthy choices to your dinner table. Serve a nice green salad as an appetizer. For dessert, skip

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the ice cream and serve fresh strawberries and yogurt. Instead of using processed spaghetti, use high fiber wheat pasta, available in most grocery stores. Whole wheat pasta is rich in nutrients and fiber and is helpful to the digestive system.

When in doubt, pack some leftovers! – This may be the greatest idea in the history of school lunches. Cook a meal for dinner that the child likes. Make enough so that there are leftovers to put into a Thermos® for the child to take school. Some schools have microwaves, where the child can warm up the meal with little help. Thermos® lunches are a quick way to help your child eat healthy without taking a lot of extra time out of your morning.



Myth - *I don't have time to cook or pack lunch and the only meal my child eats all day is school lunch!*

School lunch doesn't have to be all gloom and doom. Most schools have healthy options that allow a child to meet his/her nutritional needs without eating any empty calories. The key is teaching the child about good eating habits. Instead of a slice of pizza with potato chips (two heavy carbohydrates) teach the child to try different flavors and textures in different food groups. A salad or a soup gives the fiber and vitamins necessary to run the complex

systems in the body. Also, speak with the child's teacher to see if they will allow a water bottle in the classroom. Children who have easy access to water or fresh juice will be less likely to hit the vending machine at lunchtime.



Myth - *School lunch is never very good and it will never change!*

Not true! School districts are always trying to be better. Get involved in the decision-making process that guides the school lunch menus in your school. When push comes to shove, district administrators have no choice but to listen to parents.

In all, eating healthy at school always seems hard. In order for children to learn about good nutrition, we must teach it to them. The links between nutrition and classroom behavior have been debated for a long time. Everyone agrees, but few people are willing to do something about it. We cannot look at good nutrition as a substitute for special education interventions, or doctor-prescribed medications, but at the end of the day, what a child puts in his/her body will affect how a child does in school. If we are supportive and allow the child to take an important role in his/her own nutrition, the results might be incredibly delicious.

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[106 –What's Your Child Eating for Lunch?](#)

Resources

- Brown, Jennifer. (2007, August 23). Brown bagging it in style. The Toronto Star.
 Marcus, Susan. (2007). The hungry brain: The nutrition/cognition connection. New York, NY: Corwin Press.
 Rivkin, Mary. (2007, March). Keeping fit–In body and mind! Early Childhood Today.
 Becker, E., & Burros, M. (2003, January 13). Eat your vegetables? Only at a few schools. The New York Times.

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