

Back to School Lunches: Eating Smart

The kids are back in school, if not, they will be soon. In addition to the nightly rituals of homework and making sure things are ready for the next day comes the daily “what will they eat for lunch” discussion. For some, that can be a struggle.

Being hungry has an enormous impact on a student’s ability to learn, so you want to make sure your child has enough to eat during the day. At the same time you want it to be healthy – but they have to WANT to eat it, too. It can be a delicate balance.

Shelby Miller is a pediatric dietitian with the University of Illinois College of Medicine. She focuses on weight management as part of the Healthy Kids University program.

When it comes to school lunches Miller says planning ahead is key. Most schools have a menu that is sent out. She encourages families to look at those menus and decide if what’s offered is something their child will eat or not. If they don’t eat lunch they can come home hungry and either eat a huge snack and won’t eat dinner, or they just eat all night, which can lead to obesity.

Miller says it’s okay to send your child with some healthy extras to go along with the cafeteria lunch.

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Shelby Miller, Pediatric Dietitian, University of Illinois College of Medicine

“If it’s chicken patty sandwich with green beans and a fruit and a milk and the kids like the sandwich and they like the fruit, but maybe they don’t like green beans, send them with some carrots. You can kind of fill that hole with something else. Or if they don’t ever like the sides that go with the main dish, and you want them to have that main thing, whether it be the chicken sandwich or the cheeseburger or the pizza, it’s okay to always send something extra.”

If you pack your child’s lunch, Miller says to try to balance it with all of the food groups including fruits and vegetables, and don’t go overboard on grains. She says if your child doesn’t like the lowfat white milk offered go for water, even using flavor drops is okay. The occasional chocolate or strawberry milk often sold by schools is okay on occasion, think of it as a once-a-week treat.

When it comes to high schoolers, one of the biggest issues is them skipping lunch altogether because they can’t get to the lunchroom with enough time to eat or they head straight to the a la cart lines with pizza and chips or sugary treats. Miller says while those are okay every once in a while, they shouldn’t an everyday occurrence.

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“A lot of the high schools in the area do have like a salad bar option, so promoting that a couple times a week, but again it’s so okay to have nachos every once in a while. It’s completely okay to have that pizza every once in a while. So coming up with one, maybe two days a week that you let yourself have that a la carte option, otherwise packing a lunch, having that standard lunch that includes fruits and vegetables or picking from the salad bar line is going to be key.”

Another key to making sure your child eats healthy is to make sure YOU are setting a good example.

More information about Healthy Kids University can be found through [OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois](#).