

Five Tips to Help Your Child Pick A Healthy School Lunch



A highlight of every school day is lunch. It's a break in the day, a time to hang out with friends and a time to get some much-needed energy back into the body and brain.

But, some lunches come up short. Poor food choices leave kids lacking in essential nutrients that won't likely be captured later in the day. Here are five [nutrition](#) strategies to help your kids know how to put some punch in their lunch when they walk through the cafeteria line:

1. Have every meal contain something good for their bones. Up to 90 percent of a person's bone density is formed by age 18. Osteoporosis, though considered an older person's condition, is really a problem that develops when kids are young; part of its risk depends on how well bones are "fed" during those early years. Make sure your child's lunch contains bone-building foods rich in calcium, potassium, vitamin D and magnesium. Low-fat dairy foods like milk and some cheeses can contain all of the above.
2. Always have protein and a wholesome grain on the tray. Protein is important for the growth of every cell in the body, including muscle and brain cells. Whole grains are an important - and preferred - source of energy for the brain. School lunches can be a good source of both protein and whole grains as many menus are shifting to include foods that are more healthful.
3. Pick foods with bright colors, crunch and crispness. Fruits and vegetables fill that role. Kids, and adults, eat with their eyes and nose as well as their taste buds. A steady diet of earth tones gets boring. Color, crunch and crispness put pizzazz on the plate and wake up the senses. Apples, oranges and bananas are great, but consider adding peppers, kiwi, berries and sugar snap peas for more interest and fun.
4. Make the drink matter. Every day, 20 percent or more of caloric intake comes from what kids choose to drink. At lunch, choose a drink that makes a difference for the rest of the afternoon, and beyond. Milk is marvelous for its bone benefits. A 100 percent fruit juice works; so does plain water.
5. Make their plate MyPlate. Earlier this summer the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued an easy to understand visual of what a [healthy meal](#) looks like. In a snapshot it's easy to see how a healthy meal should be proportioned. Show your kids the plate, talk about what's on it and encourage them to make their lunch tray look the same.

School lunches give kids the opportunity to take ownership in their health by learning how to make good choices for their growing bodies. Kids want to be strong, look good and perform well at what they love to do. Smart choices at lunch help them accomplish all this and more.