

# Healthy School Lunches by Dr. Claudia Anrig

Parents today recognize the importance of feeding their children healthy, nutritious foods. The problem is that the food the cafeteria serves and the lunches parents actually pack really do not live up to the standards of healthy food our children should be eating. Between a busy family schedule and/or accommodating to the whims (or whining) of their children, parents are in a constant battle to raise their kids in a healthy manner, particularly when it comes to school lunches. Helping parents out with new ideas and giving them the confidence to change this meal can help reinforce your support of their family and their health.

## What's Being Served?

Although programs addressing this problem have begun to appear over the past few years, the fact is that not much has changed. The majority of entrees served on school campuses include pizza, Sloppy Joes, cheeseburgers, hot dogs and corn dogs. Children will usually pick up the fatty foods and skip out on the salad bar, vegetables or fresh fruit, if it happens to be provided.

## The Traditional Sandwich

Commonly found in the packed lunch is the traditional sandwich; the problem is that bad choices can be made here as well. For example, parents purchasing white bread often equate “enriched” as a healthy food selection. They then combine it with something equally as unhealthy; peanut butter (hydrogenated oil) and jelly (processed sugar), processed meats (chemicals) and cheeses (processed food; not even the real thing).

A better sandwich suggestion includes whole-grain breads, almond butter (and unsweetened jelly), baked or roasted meats, and sliced vegetables. (cucumbers, red peppers, etc.) Don't forget some sprinkles of flax seed. Another great sandwich option is a “wrap.” This can be done by purchasing whole-grain or gluten-free tortillas and wrapping up healthier protein and vegetable sources. For instance, start with baked turkey or chicken and add any or all of the following: cucumbers, sprouts, red peppers, hummus or a handful of beans. These choices can definitely be considered an improvement over what most children consume during their lunch hour.

## Perfect Packing

Part of putting together a healthy packed lunch is having the right storage containers. Be sure to use an insulated lunch box that will hold up to four small food containers and a thermos. Recommend that families purchase at least two sets of containers; this will help avoid having to wash them each night. As for the thermos, be sure that it is the wide-mouthed variety, which can be used for many purposes.

## The Beverage

When it comes to healthy lunches, milk (yes, it's true – see some of my archived columns), juice and soda should be avoided when at all possible. The American Academy of Pediatrics says that juice consumption is contributing to cavities and gastrointestinal issues for children. The best choice is water in a stainless steel container, which not only promotes “green,” but also reduces costs.

## **The Entrée**

Great sources of protein that can be put in a small lunch container include cubes of baked chicken, turkey or tofu. Encourage parents to get away from processed meats and instead plan ahead for leftovers from dinner that can be cut into bite-sized pieces and eaten as finger food. Also remember that a hard-boiled egg can be a great source of protein.

The wide-mouthed thermos can bring great variety to an average lunch. Chili beans (another great source of protein) with organic tortilla chips for dipping can break up a boring lunch routine. If families prepare homemade soups and stew on weekends, this can easily steer them away from the unnecessary chemicals and high salt content present in many store-bought brands.

## **The Side Dishes**

One of the side dishes that we need to encourage kids to enjoy is green vegetables (snap peas, broccoli, zucchini slices, etc.). However, don't forget to expand the color spectrum (squashes, red and yellow bell peppers) to include the antioxidant family. Introduce a healthy dip like hummus. You can also find very healthy vegetable-based dips not only in whole- and health-food stores, but also in major chain stores.

Fruit is also a great side dish, but parents should be encouraged to avoid buying fruit cups and processed roll-ups for their children. A lunch would be much healthier by topping a sliced or chopped organic fruit with shredded coconut or raisins, or even adding raw nuts to the mix.

Consider putting together a grain salad; for example, couscous or steamed long-grain brown rice with chopped cucumbers, red peppers, baby carrots, or any other similar vegetable. Parents might consider marinating 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.

## **Create a Menu**

No one knows better than a child what they're going to want for lunch, so it's important to let them actively participate in the menu and preparation of their lunches. By including children in the menu process, they are more likely to finish what they started. Where do parents begin? By committing to only healthy lunch choices. This might begin by selecting a cooking/menu book for children or finding Web sites that focus on whole/natural menus for kids.

Parents should then develop a planning board so that children can mix and match their lunch menu for the week. Parents can buy a white board, poster board or something similar, and then draw out five columns and label them for each day of the week. Using color-coded Post-It notes, index cards or colored paper, they can then create a square for each lunch option. For example, protein options would be blue, vegetable options would be green, fruits would be yellow and snacks would be pink.

During the weekend, children should select from each of the food cards and build a five-day lunch menu. While this is being done, the entire family can begin prepackaging their lunch options that can be frozen or stored for a few days.

## **In Summary**

It's important that both parents and their children address the lunch issue. If we let this meal "go to the waste side," we are not only losing another opportunity for children to grow up healthy with the necessary building blocks, but also missing the opportunity to teach them that each meal counts and can have great taste appeal.