

Packing a Healthy Lunch for a Healthy Student

The first day of school is not too far away. Packing a healthy lunch can help your kids succeed in school by making sure they get the nutrition they need to get throughout the day. Including the five food groups from MyPlate; proteins, vegetables, fruit, grains, and dairy, will help children get the nutrition they need in order for their brains and bodies to grow.

Protein, which is generally considered meat, is important to help your children grow and develop strong muscles. Protein also helps a child feel full, so they won't be distracted by hunger in the middle of class. Include meats that are low in fat, such as lean turkey or extra lean chicken. Plant based proteins, such as beans, are also a great way to get the benefits of protein.

Vegetables help provide vital nutrients and fiber to your kids daily meals. Include a variety of vegetables to ensure that a variety of nutrients are provided with lunch. While some children may prefer to not eat vegetables, always offering vegetables as a choice will encourage healthy eating. Try making vegetables fun by cutting them into sticks and offering something for them to dunk the vegetables in, such as hummus or fresh salsa.

Fruits are a fun way to add a dessert to lunch, without adding extra sugar. Try to mix up the fruit selection by adding a different color fruit each day. You can do a red apple, green pear, purple grapes, oranges, a yellow banana, or a variety of other fruits. Including a yogurt dip can also make this a fun way to have a nutritious dessert.

Grains, especially whole grains, are ways to provide energy to get through the entire school day. You can vary the grains by including whole grain tortillas for wraps, or whole grain pita bread. Providing a variety of whole-wheat options can make the meal interesting by letting children build their own lunch while at school.

Dairy is important for kids to build strong bones and teeth. You can always add yogurt or cheese as food for lunch, or consider adding milk for their drink. Be sure to choose foods that are low in fat and avoid added sugars. Low-fat or skim milk is a great option for kids, without added sugar like what you would get from many fruit juices.

Kids who help select and pack their lunch are more likely to eat that lunch, according to the American Heart Association. Help your kids pack their lunch at home the night before. Then you help them make healthy choices, and spend time together as a family.

For more information or ideas for building a healthy lunch, visit the Dinner Tonight website at: dinnertonight.org.