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PACK SCHOOL LUNCHES WITH CLASS

School is back in session and the lunchtime struggle resumes. Kids want fun food that tastes good while parents strive to provide a meal on the go that supplies good nutrition that they will eat. Remember, just because the lunchbox comes home empty does not mean the food was eaten. Any student will admit that trading, giving away, and just plain trashing of unwanted food abounds in school cafeterias.

Knowledge of what your child likes to eat is the key to packing a successful lunch. While this sounds obvious, it is the best way to ensure your child will actually eat what you send. Take the time to discuss food likes and dislikes with your child. You may discover what was disliked last year is now acceptable and vice versa. This is also a good opportunity to teach what constitutes a proper meal.

Involving your child in grocery shopping is another way to widen their culinary horizons. For example, point out during a shopping trip that sandwiches taste good if made on other things besides bread. Bagels, tortillas and pita bread add variety and interest.

Encourage your child to help make his lunch with you each evening. Better yet, give them the responsibility if age appropriate. Not only does this allow your child to “preview” the next day’s lunch, but it also can be a time for new lunch creations to evolve. One child slathered a peeled banana with peanut butter, drizzled honey over it and wrapped a tortilla around it all for a new lunchtime sandwich. While a bit unconventional, it provided good nutrition, fun, and gave the child a sense of pride at his creation.

Nutrition experts stress the importance of variety in the diet as a way to be sure adequate amounts of all nutrients are attained. Yet a child’s concept of variety may not be the same. Some children are happiest with lunchtime pizza every day while others would consider pizza every other day as “variety” in their diet. Look at your child’s total intake over the entire week to evaluate whether or not their diet is varied. Provide lunches with servings from all the food groups – grains, fruits, vegetables, meats/protein and low fat daily.

Finally, look at your child’s portion sizes. Many parents serve adult-sized portions to their young children and then label them “picky” eaters when food is left on the plate at each meal. It is unrealistic to expect a six-year-old to finish an adult-sized club sandwich or even a large piece of fruit, for example. For specific guidelines on what your child needs consult the USDA MyPyramid website and enter their age, gender and activity level.

The link is <http://www.mypyramid.gov/mypyramid/index.aspx>

Knowing your child's true nutrition needs and appetite is as important as knowing his food preferences.

With the new school year upon us, a refresher course in preparing safe, nutritious "brown bag" lunches is in order. You can listen to a podcast on Back to School Food Safety at www.foodsafety.gov/keep/events/backtoschool/

The safety rules for brown bag lunches are basic. As with any food preparation, the key is to keep hot food hot, cold food cold and everything clean! This means washing hands before handling food and scrubbing utensils, countertops, lunchboxes and thermos bottles with hot, soapy water after each use to prevent the growth of bacteria that might contaminate other foods.

Do not pack perishables in your child's lunch box or bag unless you can keep them hot or cold enough. An insulated thermos does a good job of keeping soups and stews at safe temperatures. Nevertheless, because most children do not have access to a refrigerator at school, keeping cold foods cold can be more of a challenge. Pack the lunch in an insulated lunch box, with a frozen gel pack or a frozen juice box to keep cold foods cold.

Studies show that both nutrition and fitness can have a significant impact on daily attendance, classroom participation, test scores and even behavior. Brain research indicates that proper nutrition combined with physical activity leads to optimal learning – and helps all students make the grade. These facts stress why you should pack lunches with class or sign up your child to eat lunch at school. Either choice.....they will be on their way to making student success! Have a great school year!

CHAMPION CHICKEN PITAS

Makes 4 sandwiches

1/4 cup plain low-fat yogurt

1/4 cup fat-free mayonnaise

1-1/2 cups cooked chicken, diced

1/2 cup seedless green or red grapes, halved

1 stalk celery, diced

1/4 cup chopped walnuts or pecans

Lettuce or spinach leaves

4 slices whole wheat bread *or* 2 large pita bread rounds, halved

Combine yogurt and mayonnaise in a small bowl. In a medium bowl, combine chicken, grapes, celery and nuts. Add yogurt mixture and stir well to coat. Line each pita half with lettuce. Evenly divide chicken mixture between the 4 pita pockets.

CARROT COOKIES

Makes 60 cookies

1/2 cup soft margarine
1 cup honey*
1 cup grated raw carrots
2 well beaten egg whites
2 cups all purpose flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/4 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon cinnamon
2 cups raw oatmeal, quick cooking
1 cup raisins

In a large bowl, cream together margarine and honey. Stir in carrots and eggs. Stir together flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, oatmeal and raisins. Gradually stir flour-oatmeal mixture into creamed mixture, just until all flour is mixed. Do not over mix. Drop from teaspoon on greased baking sheet. Flatten slightly and bake at 350°F for 10 minutes, or until lightly browned.

***Note:** Instead of honey, you can use 1 1/4 cups sugar mixed with 1/4 cup water.

PEAR DIP

Makes 1 cup

1 can (16 ounces) pears packed in fruit juice, drained
1/2 cup part skim ricotta cheese
3 tablespoons confectioner's sugar
1/8 teaspoon ground cinnamon

In a blender or food processor, blend all ingredients thoroughly. Serve with fruit slices or graham crackers.

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