Writing this bi-weekly column is one of the most rewarding parts of my job. The biggest challenge is thinking up new and timely topics. Seasons, holidays, and promotions often help dictate subject matter. Other times, the topic presents itself through personal experiences like what happened earlier this week.

In the mailbox was a bright yellow envelope addressed to the parents of Alexander Rhoades. Alex, my middle son, will soon be starting college and the school is trying to persuade me to purchase a “welcome package” to show my support. They even included brightly colored cards where I could write a special note of encouragement. Great idea for a college fund raiser, except the package is 90% empty calories with barely an ounce of nutrition. While Alex, who is extremely thin, can afford these empty calories, I have no intention of promoting bad eating habits while he makes the transition into college. This real life experience provided me yet a new “opportunity” to stand up to the status quo and promote a healthier food environment.

Promptly I contacted the college and suggested they offer healthier options, explaining that two-thirds of American adults are now overweight or obese. In a positive voice, I praised them for the healthy choices offered in the college cafeteria and encouraged them to carry that forward to other school activities. I followed up by sending them a brand new resource developed by USDA, MYPLATE On Campus Toolkit.

Surprisingly they were very receptive and my hope is this time next year the selection will be different. This does not mean they should not offer any sweets or snacks. I do not embrace the food police mentality and believe it does more harm than good in the long run. I just want a balance of options that include healthy items so there is a choice.

Throughout my life as a parent I have challenged the system to do things differently. This did not make me popular, but perhaps made people and organizations think about what they are promoting. Proudly I informed the Boy Scout troop leader that my son would not be selling M&M’s, today they sell popcorn. I refused to support the never ending PTA candy fundraisers. I said no to church staff when they asked me to donate liters of soda and raised the question, “Why not just offer water.”

Along the way I strived to support changes through my actions. It’s known as “walking the talk.” For example, I bought watermelon for the school picnic, prepared a veggie tray for the
school party, packed healthy snacks for the soccer team, and cooked real food for the youth group instead of ordering pizza.

As you send your children off to school this year, be it preschool, elementary school, high school, or college, I challenge YOU to stand up for a healthier food environment. Together we can support a healthier generation. My children deserve it and so do yours!

**SLOW COOKER APPLESAUCE**

This is a family favorite and an easy item to bring to church, school, and other events. The aroma makes this irresistible. Apples are naturally sweet so you do not need to add sugar. A lover of tart foods, my favorite apple to use is granny smith, but you can experiment and see what you like best.

2 pounds apples  
5 cinnamon sticks

Wash and peel apples. Core and cut into chunks. Place apples and cinnamon sticks in slow cooker and cook for three hours or less on High. For chunky sauce cook less.

**VEGGIE TRAY WITH CUCUMBER YOGURT DIP**

For school parties for older children, send in this veggie tray. Be creative and give students the opportunity to try some new vegetables. You will be surprised how a little peer pressure will encourage them to eat something new.

1 large cucumber  
2 cups plain yogurt, low-fat  
1/2 cup sour cream, low-fat  
1 tablespoon lemon juice  
1 tablespoon fresh dill  
1 garlic clove, chopped

Peel, seed, and grate cucumber. Mix with other ingredients and place in serving bowl. Chill for one hour before serving. Serve with raw vegetables like, broccoli florets, carrot sticks, cauliflower, celery sticks, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, green and red pepper, mushrooms, and raw squash like zucchini and yellow squash. Even raw rutabaga is delicious with dip!

**FRUIT DIP**

This is a yummy dip that provides calcium and makes any fruit delicious. You can experiment with other juice concentrates like pineapple, tangerine, grape, etc.

2 cups plain or vanilla yogurt, low-fat
2 tablespoons orange juice concentrate

Mix together yogurt and orange juice concentrate. Chill until you are ready to serve as a dip for pieces of fresh fruit – peaches, strawberries, kiwi, bananas, etc.

CAUTION: Toddlers and preschoolers should not be served grapes, whole berries, carrot sticks, cherry tomatoes, or large pieces of raw fruits and vegetables to avoid choking!

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Deborah Rhoades, MA, RD, LDN, is a licensed Registered Dietitian and Extension Educator in Family and Consumer Sciences.

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