

just try it

A Healthy School Year Resolution

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After weeks of summer fun and less structured days, we're back to school with busier schedules and activities. Many parents are resolving to make this school year healthier, yet find it challenging when life is so busy.

As a registered dietitian, I encourage parents to find a balance between convenience and nutrient-rich choices that help children grow and perform at their best. Research consistently shows that a child's attention span, concentration and memory improve when he or she is nourished, making breakfast and lunch equally important. But a key ingredient is finding nutritious options that our kids *will actually eat*, since a lunch that goes uneaten doesn't refuel a child for afternoon classes and activities.

I'm a believer in simple lunch preparation, while using whole, fresh ingredients as much as possible. You don't have to pack your child's lunch every day, but instead try a combination by following these quick and easy strategies to make your healthy school year resolution a reality.

■ **Tip 1: Swap White Flour for Whole Grain.**

If sandwiches are a staple in your child's lunch, substituting whole wheat or whole grain bread for white bread can make a big difference in the nutrient content. Try different brands to find one your child likes best. You can also switch to whole-wheat flour tortillas, pita bread and whole grain crackers in place of bread and to add variety. Although the store-bought packaged lunches are convenient, you can quickly make a much healthier version by packing whole grain crackers with deli meat or cheese that is free of added fillers, such as Boars Head or Applegate products. Add a fruit and vegetable (instead of the juice and candy in the prepackaged version), making a lunch that is sure to be eaten and filled with protein, fiber, vitamins and minerals instead of sodium, sugar and fat.

■ **Tip 2: Have a Game Plan.** Making a healthy lunch takes some planning, and the morning rush is not the time to get started. Try packing part of the lunch the night before. For example, washing and packaging fruits and vegetables, pre-portioning snacks or side dishes and packing dinner left overs in individual containers are all time-saving steps that leave only last minute details for morning packing. Another good habit is to make a shopping list that includes lunch items and to shop weekly to prevent searching the cupboard for last-minute items that are often less healthy. Building in some preparation time on the weekend also helps lighten the weekday load. For example, cooking extra chicken or meat to make sandwich fillings, such as chicken salad or a chicken wrap and creating a pasta salad by adding left-over meat to pasta and mixing in Italian dressing are quick and easy.

■ **Tip 3: Choose School Lunch Together.** School lunch meals have improved in the last two years with more whole grains, fruits and vegetables being served. I recommend sitting down with your child to review the menu to find which days have a fruit and vegetable your child will eat and choosing days when the menu offers healthier entrees. If you feel your school meals could be improved, consider talking with your PTA or school administration about exploring alternative school meal providers, such as Choicelunch. This company offers many healthy entrée options with a variety of side dishes that appeal to kids. You can sit down with your child at the website and choose the lunch options together. It's also a great last-minute option that can be ordered online on those hectic nights when packing a lunch just isn't realistic. Finally, check in periodically with your child, asking what parts of the lunch are getting eaten, so you can make adjustments in the items you purchase and pack.

■ **Tip 4: Pack a Rainbow.** Pack a different colored fruit and vegetable to add eye appeal and increase the variety of vitamins provided. Have your child help make a list of his or her favorite fruits and vegetables to take to school. Be sure to include fresh, dried and fruit cups (packed in water or juice) to maximize variety. Try dips, such as low-fat ranch dressing, peanut butter and hummus to combine with vegetables. By including kids in the process and giving them choices, they are more likely to eat what is packed.

■ **Tip 5: Skip the Juice.** I recommend packing a reusable water bottle or buying milk at lunch. Juice bags and boxes are convenient, but whole fruits provide more nutrients and less concentrated sugar. Milk provides many important nutrients, including protein, potassium, calcium and vitamin D, and water is best for keeping kids hydrated. In surveying nutrition experts for my book, *400 Moms*, 62% reported serving juice three days or less per week and no more than four ounces. The takeaway message is this should be an occasional beverage, not an everyday choice in your child's lunch.

Here's to a healthy, thriving school year!

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