

It's Back to School—Help Kids Eat Healthy!

By

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Vacation time is over and it's time to get the kids ready for school! Part of that process includes helping them to eat healthy. Whether they eat school lunch, or bring a sack lunch from home, it is important that they eat healthy everyday so their bodies and brains develop normally and they will do their best in school. Besides healthy meals, children must eat healthy snacks, also. Here are some ideas to help children develop healthy eating habits and snack wisely.

First of all, healthy snacks are like òmini-mealsö that give kids an energy boost to carry them until their next meal. Snacks can help make up nutrients missed at regular meals. In addition, children's growing bodies require more food than adults, and snacks are a great way to get the added nutrients they need on a daily basis. Snack foods rich in vitamins and minerals also help keep kids from feeling hungry between meals. Here are some helpful tips to get you on the right track with smart snacks!

Snack Often—Plan to offer snacks no more than two hours between meals or other snacks. For example, if your child eats breakfast at 7:30 a.m., plan to offer a mid-morning snack for 9:30 a.m. This is an excellent opportunity to include a piece of fruit or some healthy dry cereal in your child's backpack to eat at school during snack time in the classroom.

Snack Smart—A smart snack includes at least two foods from the following food groupings:

- **Fruits & Vegetables**
- **Meat or Meat Alternatives**
- **Grains**
- **Milk/Dairy**

Pre-portion Snacks and Ingredients—Cut up fruits and vegetables in advance to make snacking safer and easier. Put cut up snacks in small plastic bags or on a covered serving plate to grab on the go.

Keep it Healthy—Avoid high sugar, fatty, and salty snacks like regular soda, sugary drinks, fruit snacks, baked goods (like cookies, cakes, and pies) and chips. Read food labels and ingredient lists before making your snack selections.

Encourage children to invent new snacks—Make your own trail mixes from dry cereal, dried fruit, and nuts or seeds. Give them a variety of fresh and nutritious foods to choose from and allow them to pick and choose what they want in their new snack.

Make Food Fun—Sugary foods that are marketed to kids are advertised as fun foods. You can make nutritious foods fun by having your child help make them. Make a smiley face with sliced bananas for eyes, raisins for a nose, and an orange slice for a mouth. Or, cut fruit into fun and easy shapes with cookie cutters. Let your child make towers out of whole-grain crackers or make funny faces on plates with pieces of fruit.

Choose not to offer sweets as rewards—By offering food as a reward for good behavior, kids learn to think that some foods are better than other foods. Reward your child with kind words and comforting hugs or non-food items, like stickers, to make them feel special.

If meals are not eaten, kids do not need “extras”—Candy or cookies are not replacements for foods not eaten at meal times.

I hope this has given you some new ideas to consider when preparing food for your children to eat as they are starting a brand new school year. Children's bodies are growing at a rapid rate and it is so very important to make sure they eat healthy and nutritious food during these school-aged years. Their health and well-being is worth every effort! For more information check out the website www.mealsmatter.org or contact the Hardee County Extension Office at 863-773-2164. (Source: July and August 2010 FNP newsletters)