

School Lunch UPGRADE



Tips for making
your child's lunch
nutritious and fun

STORY BY JENNIFER STREISAND

Getting children directly involved in preparing their lunch for school—the planning, shopping, and packing—is one way to teach healthy eating habits from an early age. But everyone knows that especially during the K-12 years, lunch has to be more than good nutrition; it has to dazzle, just like a good lesson in math or English class.

In order to accomplish this, the presentation of lunch is as important as how it tastes, notes Michelle McQueen, a clinical dietician at IU Health Arnett Hospital in Lafayette, and the mother of a 4-year-old.

“I like to use pita pocket breads, and those are fun because it is a pocket. You can send the items that you want to put in the sandwich separate from the pita bread, and the kids can prepare it there themselves,” she says. “Kids are very hands on: They like to dip and play with their food, and that is a good way for them to be involved and like what they are doing.” There are a lot of choices when it comes to breads these days, including captivating options such as tortilla wraps that are whole grain or have added vegetables, McQueen explains.

Moms, dads and caregivers can even make their own “lunchable” sets by using leftovers from the night before and mixing and matching their child’s favorite foods. This is also a way to have more control over portion sizes.

Portion sizes and dietary guidelines are part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s new MyPlate program, which has replaced the well known food pyramid. MyPlate is a holistic approach to eating healthy, meaning that it is not a specific label to find on foods, but rather an icon, a poster or a visual prompt that consumers will find in grocery stores to remind them to make healthier choices when shopping for food, says Robert Post, deputy director for the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, which has been instrumental in implementing the new MyPlate program. MyPlate was unveiled on June 2, 2011, by the USDA with the help of First Lady Michelle Obama and other federal officials.

“This is a quick, simple reminder for all of us to be more mindful of the foods that we’re eating, and as a mom, I can already tell how much this is going to help parents across the country,” Obama

said in a 2011 news release by the USDA regarding the new program. Obama initiated the “Let’s Move” campaign specifically focused on kids to make a healthy lifestyle paramount, including diet and physical fitness.

In addition to highlighting the food groups, The MyPlate icon has bright, memorable colors and is designed to be visually appealing to children and adults.

“One of the major themes of the USDA dietary guidelines is that we need to consume more foods that are nutrient dense like fruits and vegetables, and whole grains,” says Post. When launching MyPlate, one of the messages to Americans was “Make half your plate fruits and vegetables,” he explains.

One way to get kids involved in planning and preparing meals is to have them go to the website, www.ChooseMyPlate.gov, which can keep any child or adult busy for hours, thinking about meals, food shopping, and even gathering gardening information for a healthier lifestyle. The website includes recipes, contests and something called a “Super Tracker,” which is its own form of

social media. The Super Tracker allows the visitor to build a profile and then get recommendations on food choices and physical fitness, for free.

“If you haven’t been at ChooseMyPlate.gov, it’s the next best thing to sliced whole wheat bread,” says Post. “It is the ultimate dietary assessment, weight management and physical activity tracking tool.”

Most children still eat lunch at school, and schools are playing their part to make the lunch hour something to look forward to but also healthier. For example, at the West Lafayette School Corp., the food service department does not sell soft drinks. Soda machines are shut off during school hours, says Jim Tyner, food service director at the West Lafayette School Corp.

On the days when kids buy their lunches at school, students can choose an alternative menu, which is called “the B menu, and that includes such items as yogurt, apple slices, a cup of fruit, string cheese, grain or snack, and milk,” Tyner says.

“We have seen a significant increase in our lunch counts since adding the “B” lunches to the menu at the elementary schools,” he says.

Part of the challenge, Tyner acknowledges, is that school districts have to have food that kids want to eat. “Otherwise, most of the food will be wasted and tossed in the garbage,” he says.

Furthermore, if kids don’t eat the desired foods during lunch, they may binge when school is over, eating much less healthy foods in larger quantities.

Something to consider when preparing an exciting lunch for a child is mixing the healthy with the sweet in modest proportions, such as a sweet and crunchy spinach salad (see recipe), which is served at Jane’s Gourmet Deli & Catering in Lafayette.

Another way to get kids excited about healthy eating is to add the healthier choices slowly, and then kids acquire a taste for them, says Jane Ausman-Mudawar, owner of Jane’s Deli.

“If you expose kids to lots of new foods at home, then slowly, but surely, they

will eat foods like hummus, or peanut butter with apples at school, and then they will become more accustomed to eating that way,” she says.

Another example is eating pasta: Kids will eat whole wheat pasta, but not all at once.

“Kids eat so much pasta nowadays, and you can slowly add the whole wheat pasta, and mix it in with the white, and eventually, they will be eating all whole wheat, which is a better alternative, notes Caroline Hansen, a cook at Jane’s. Fans of whole wheat pasta say the flavor resembles that of nuts, and as far as nutrition goes, it has a higher fiber content, Ausman-Mudawar says.

Perhaps most importantly, if children get used to eating whole wheat pasta, then that is the taste they will always expect when they eat pasta, and with additions and variations, it’s a food that will be healthy and very transformative. ✂



Information about MyPlate can be found on the Let’s Move website (www.letsmove.gov) or by going directly to the website dedicated to MyPlate at www.ChooseMyPlate.gov.



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SWEET AND CRUNCHY SPINACH SALAD



"For busy moms and dads, use candied pecans or chow mein noodles that you can buy in the store to add the crunch."



Another great alternative for lunch is hummus with fresh fruit and crackers.

(Photos by Patrick Patton)

Prepare this salad for a school day, a weekend or a special occasion. It's a great combination of nutrition and fun, with lots of greens and fruity flair.

Recipe from Jane's Gourmet Deli & Catering (Jane Ausman-Mudawar – owner, Caroline Hansen – cook)

Ingredients:

- Fresh baby spinach
- Mandarin oranges
- Fresh strawberries, sliced

For crunch, use one of the following items on the top of the salad:

- Candied pecans
- Homemade candied almonds (Sauté almonds with sugar; this cooks very fast, and you must keep a close eye on it to prevent burning.)
- Chow mein noodles (particularly good for kids with nut allergies)

Lightly toss spinach, oranges and strawberries. Top with nuts or chow mein noodles. Serve dressing on the side, which controls the amount, and is good for a portable school lunch. At Jane's Gourmet Deli & Catering, the salad is served with an apricot poppy seed dressing that is made at the restaurant. You can substitute any dressing that is sweet with a touch of tartness, for the ideal flavor.

Serve with bread slices or add chicken for protein.