

Packing school lunches with healthy punch

By Nicki Anderson / September 1, 2010

I must admit, I don't miss packing school lunches. I remember every night before school, I would do what I could to pack a healthy lunch that my kids would actually eat. But with all the advertisements for junk food that would suck my kids in, they would beg for processed "pseudo-foods" making lunch prep a nightmare for me. Despite their best efforts, I held fast to my principles and ultimately packed lunches that were healthy and ultimately consumed by my kids.

According to Center for Disease Control, childhood obesity has more than tripled in the past 30 years. The prevalence of obesity among children aged 6 to 11 years increased from 6.5 percent in 1980 to 19.6 percent in 2008. The prevalence of obesity among adolescents aged 12 to 19 years increased from 5.0 percent to 18.1 percent. Clearly, those numbers show us that change is in order and that sometimes we just have to say, "No" in an effort to preserve our children's health and well-being.

"Pack a lunch that's age-appropriate in size and your child will eat it, barring any heavy snacks during the morning," said **Christine Palumbo**, Naperville registered dietitian and writer for the Good Sense Eating column for Chicago Parent magazine.

"There's no need to tiptoe around a child's food fussiness. A child who eats breakfast at 7:45 a.m. will be good and hungry by the time the lunch period rolls around."

"There are so many options besides sandwiches for children who just aren't into them. How about a slice or two of pizza, depending on the size of the slice? Take a whole wheat tortilla and make a wrap using lean sliced lunchmeat, a little cheese and some baby spinach.

"When the weather gets cooler, pour homemade chili, black bean soup or chicken noodle soup into a Thermos jar along with some whole grain crackers like Rye Krisp or reduced fat Triscuits to warm little tummies."

Dawn Ferus, Naperville mother of two, makes sure the lunches she packs for her kids are as healthy as they can be.

"It's a rule in our house to always include a fruit or vegetable in their lunch," she said. "Maybe once a week, I'll pack a surprise treat like a healthy cookie. Also, whole wheat bread is a must as well."

Palumbo reminds parents to avoid packing juice over milk.

"I prefer children drink plain low-fat milk, as it's a great package for not only calcium and vitamin D, but also protein and potassium," Palumbo said. "If they won't drink milk at school, pack a frozen bottle of water instead of the juice in order to save on calories and sugars."

Other common mistakes made when packing lunches is caving into pressure to pack less-than-healthy foods as well as mistaking fruit snacks, processed fruit rolls and the like for real fruit.

"They are not the same, not even close," Palumbo said.

Palumbo offers these tips for school lunches:

- Aim for three of the five food groups for each lunch. The food groups are dairy, fruit, vegetable, grain and lean protein. For example, a lunch might include a crisp golden delicious apple and a sliced chicken sandwich made from 100 percent whole wheat bread (made with chicken left from last night's dinner).
- Create a "lunch central" in your pantry or cupboards to make it easier to grab items when creating lunches.
- Right before the weekly shopping trip, create a meal plan for the week. This meal plan should include lunches and dinners that are appropriate for the season and the family's schedule, as well as what's on sale.

Parents do their best to encourage their children to be good students and study hard. Perhaps it's time to add healthy eating as part of a well-rounded education for our kids.

Contact Nicki Anderson at nicki@realityfitness.com with ideas for her column.