

Super Snacks to the Rescue

by Karen Giles-Smith, MS, RD

When thinking about kids snacks, what's the first thing that comes to mind? For many people, it's "junk" food: treats high in calories and fat and low in nutrients. But, when done right, snacking can be a parent's best friend in terms of their children's health. With a little know-how and planning, snacking can help children get the vitamins, minerals and energy needed for growth and health.

Unfortunately, most children -- a whopping 98 percent -- don't get the recommended number of daily servings from the five food groups. Instead, kids are filling up on foods and beverages with few nutrients. In fact, a study published in *The Journal of Pediatrics* indicates that children get one-quarter of their calories from low-nutrient foods. As a result, children are falling short on five critical nutrients: calcium, fiber, magnesium, vitamin E and potassium. Healthful snacking can help fill in these nutrient gaps.

Make healthy snacks kid-friendly

As busy parents, it may seem easier to stock soda pop, chips and cookies for snack time, but there are many healthy options that are just as convenient. Luckily for parents, many children are trying to eat better, according to *Food Technology* magazine. What are kids craving? Yogurt is the fastest growing healthful snack choice among younger children, with a 14 percent increase in sales in the last five years, followed by fresh fruit.

For a stress-free snack time, keep plenty of healthy snacks on hand. Young children need to snack frequently -- two to three times a day -- because their stomachs are small, but their nutrient and energy needs are high. Or, create simple, fun snacks that kids can help prepare like Celery Racers or Mr. Cottage Cheese Face. Kids who help in the kitchen are less likely to be picky eaters.

For older children who can serve themselves, keep a basket in the refrigerator filled with ready-to-eat vegetables, fruits, cheese and single-serve containers of yogurt, pudding and milk. In the cupboard, keep another basket stocked with cereal bars, whole-wheat crackers, dried fruit and nuts.

Build a Super Snack

Think of a snack as a mini-meal. Incorporate two or three of the five food groups (dairy, fruits, vegetables, grains and meat/beans). For example, a snack of half of a grilled cheese sandwich on whole-grain bread and a pear contains three food groups: grain, dairy and fruit.

Re-think Drinks

What children drink is just as important as what they eat. According to The Centers for Disease Control, 85 percent of adolescent females do not consume enough calcium. During the past 25 years, consumption of milk, the largest source of calcium, decreased

36 percent among teen girls. At the same time, average soft drink consumption doubled among adolescent girls and tripled among adolescent boys.

What's a parent to do? The trick is to serve milk, 100% fruit juice or water with meals and snacks. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) urges children and teens to enjoy three servings of milk, cheese or yogurt each day. Specifically, the AAP recommends whole milk for one to two year-olds and low-fat milk for children two years old and up. Young children (one to six year-olds) should be limited to no more than four to six ounces (about a half a cup) of fruit juice each day and older children (seven to 18 year-olds) should drink no more than one to one and a half cups each day.

Your Children Are Watching

Several studies show that parents' eating behaviors may influence children's snack and beverage choices. A study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* found that mothers can positively influence their daughter's bone health by drinking milk. Results showed moms who drank milk had daughters who drank more milk and fewer soft drinks.

If kids don't like regular milk, offer flavored milk. It has the same nine essential nutrients as regular milk and studies show that children who drink flavored milk get more calcium but don't consume more sugar or fat.

To ensure that snacking is nourishing without being a source of excess calories, focus on the five food groups. A few cookies or chips are fine -- it's the long-term quality of children's diets that counts.

Try the Monster Munch Mix for a satisfying snack, or any of these other great ideas:

- Celery Racers: a celery stick topped with peanut butter and raisins and banana slices as wheels
- Yogurt Pops: flavored yogurt and a popsicle stick or plastic spoon frozen in paper cups.
- Mini pizza
- Cheese Bug: string cheese with mini pretzel stick legs and antennae
- Mr. Cottage Cheese Face: a scoop of cottage cheese topped with raisin eyes, a banana slice nose and a tomato wedge mouth.
- Smoothie made with yogurt and fruit
- Half of a peanut butter sandwich and milk
- Cereal with milk
- Cheese and crackers
- Animal crackers and a fruit cup
- Yogurt, granola and fruit parfait

Visit www.3aday.org for more super snack ideas.

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