

Snack Time Suggestions

By Laura Mezirka

All parents have disagreements with their children about food and eating. In some families, food becomes a focus of frequent conflict. Children want to gain some control over their lives. They are frustrated by parents' trying to provide them with a nutritious diet because they want to make their own choices. Food is an area in which even very young children can also frustrate their parents.

Parents can use the children's desire to master their environment to their advantage. We need to think in terms of assisting children in their development. We need to educate them and allow them to be involved and make choices.

While it may seem easier to leave the children at home when we shop for food, we can use shopping as an

opportunity both to educate our children about nutrition and to give them some choices among the foods we wish them to eat. Even a toddler likes to be asked to pick a fruit for snacks. (A simple guide I gave to my pre-schooler when she inevitably wanted the most expensive out-of-season fruits was that she had to pick something with just two digits on the tag.) Trips to the farmers market lead children to associate fresh product with good times. A Saturday morning farmers market also displaces Saturday morning television with its ads for less desirable foods. Older children can be given a small calculator and asked to compare the price per ounce of sugary over-packaged cereals with plain oatmeal, or hot cereals.

Discuss with your children the ways in which advertisers try to persuade them to base their decisions on packaging, ad jingles and image instead of the actual

product. Point out that the advertisers are treating them as if they are not smart enough to see past the hype, while you, their parent, know that they are smarter than that. Older children can be enlisted to check the ingredients for consistency with the big type on the front of the package (see the box for a sample of inconsistency).

WHAT THE SMALL PRINT REVEALS

Ingredients for a "Cereal Bar" labeled as:
"Very Nutritious, Low Fat, No Preservatives, with Wheat, Whole-grain Oats and Fruit"

Those are some of the big words on the box. In very small print, the **Ingredients** are:

Filling ([**high fructose corn syrup**, blueberry puree from concentrate, water] glycerin, **maltodextrin**, natural and artificial blueberry flavor, sodium alginate, modified corn starch, citric acid, calcium phosphate, soy lecithin, xanthin gum, malic acid, red #40, blue #1), enriched wheat flour, whole oats, **sugar**, partially hydrogenated soybean and/or cottonseed oil, **high fructose corn syrup**, **honey**, **dextrose**, nonfat dry milk, wheat bran, soy lecithin, salt cellulose gum, natural and artificial vanilla flavor, potassium bicarbonate, wheat gluten, dried whey, niacinamide, zinc oxide, reduced iron, pyridoxine hydrochloride (vitamin B6) riboflavin (vitamin B2) vitamin A palmitate, thiamin hydrochloride (vitamin B1), and folic acid.

Emphasis added to the six listings for various sugars.

At home, a handy bowl of various fruits can offer some healthy choices. You may also want to remember to have a variety of acceptable snacks available.

Making Snacks with Children

For beginning "cooks," a starting place might be the preparation of simple snacks they can "create".

Circle Snacks: Choose one round base, use your choice of "glue" to add the "goodies". You provide a choice of bases, such as small tortillas, bagel halves, unsweetened rice cakes, or English muffin halves. The glue might be peanut butter, refried beans, cream cheese, or shredded cheese to be melted by you in the microwave. Toppings might be raisins, apple slices, black olive rings, corn, grated carrot, or pineapple chunks. With the youngest children, you might want to provide circles and glue and just let them choose from two or three toppings. What will be interesting is the combinations they will think of on their own. Let them try some.

Weird finger foods: Leftover cooked carrots, broccoli, green beans. Canned green beans. Peas still in the pod. Frozen peas - not defrosted, just served frozen. Frozen grapes in the summer. Remember, anything cut up, stuck with a toothpick and dipped in nonfat yogurt or ranch dressing tastes much better. For soft food, a small straight pretzel can be substituted for the toothpick.

Not-so-weird finder foods: Pretzels, carrots, bread sticks.

Roll-ups: Peanut butter spread on a tortilla and rolled up. Middle Eastern flat bread spread with low fat cream cheese, rolled up and then sliced into spirals.

Smoothies: The children can put their choice of ingredients into the blender bowl: fruit juices, frozen fruit or juice, yogurt, or bananas. For more children, have them each put their ingredients into a large tumbler, and rinse the blender bowl before adding the next child's mix.

Chunky Frozen Treats: Let the children stuff popsicle molds or ice cube trays with small pieces of soft fruit---plums, peaches, nectarines, kiwi, strawberry, grapes---pour apple or grape juice or lemonade to fill, and freeze. The results are really pretty and very refreshing on a hot day. This is also a little lesson in deferred gratification.

Kids Choice: Keep an open mind when your children ask to try something that sounds outlandish to you. If there's no real problem with it, let them try it.

Try to allow your children to have some opportunity to make choices about food, within the limits set by you. If you do not approve of over-processed, artificially colored and flavored food made mostly of sugar, explain that this is not one of the foods they may choose. You must remember that it is our responsibility to set limits for our children. Perhaps you can arrange with other parents to set some guidelines which you will all follow.

If you are making a change in the limits your children have previously had, you can expect some protest. Children have certainly been known to threaten to starve to death if they can't have what they want to eat. In reality, what happens if they don't eat is that they get hungry. When they get hungry, they will eat. If there is some doubt about this, check with your pediatrician.

The key is to allow as much freedom as possible for the children to choose their own diet, within the limits we set. At the same time, we can be educating them to be savvy consumers and to learn a little bit about food preparation.

Laura Mezirka is best known in Yolo County as the mother of Brenda Wolfe, who always eats her lunch. Additional experience related to feeding children includes counting carrots and chicken nuggets in the Davis Joint Unified School District kitchen and serving up school lunch as a substitute lunch lady. She finds time to do plenty of reading and some writing by neglecting her housework.

