

Send your little one to school with an A+ lunch

Think back to when you were in school. What was your favorite part of the day? Was it P.E., art class or lunchtime?

One of the main reasons kids favor these activities is because they have more freedom than they do in a typical classroom. And at lunch they have the freedom to choose what they want to eat.

But kids are surrounded by super-sized portions and vending machines filled with inexpensive processed foods. "Kids that have a steady diet of these foods can pack on calories while missing out on important nutrients for good health," said Jan Ritter, a registered dietitian with the Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition at Nationwide Children's Hospital. "Providing healthier lunch alternatives at home and at school, as well as including your kids in the process, will help them learn how to choose healthy lunch options."

Check out these great lunch ideas your kids will love:

- **Mock the box.** Make your own version of the pre-packaged Lunchables that are so popular with kids. Cold-cut roll-ups of your child's favorite deli meat act as a good substitute to the meat provided in the prepackaged box. You may also include whole wheat crackers, low-fat string cheese and a fruit cup. Just add money for milk and you have a quick and healthy lunch to send to school with your child.

- **Freeze your assets.** At the beginning of the week, fill small plastic containers with low-fat yogurt and frozen fruit and store them in the freezer. By freezing these items, you will have more time in the morning to prepare the rest of your child's lunch, and it's an easy way to include more dairy and fruit in your child's diet.

- **Pre-pack the snacks.** Portion out snacks for each day of the week to help provide a variety of treats instead of the same snack day after day. Snacks such as pretzels, animal crackers, rice and marshmallow bars and homemade snack mix make for great lunch-time snack options.

- **Replace old standbys with the new and improved.** Instead of packing the overused peanut butter and jelly sandwich, try whole wheat bread, pita pockets or small round tortillas filled with tuna salad, deli meat, peanut butter or hummus and veggies.

- **Consider school lunches.** According to the guidelines set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), school meals are required to meet about 1/3 of your child's daily vitamin, mineral and calorie requirements. If you're always on the go, consider your child's school lunch program as a good alternative to a

packed lunch.

While planning and preparing healthy lunches is an important first step, it's also important that parents talk to their kids about making healthy choices and lead by example. "Parents should think about their own choices and the message they send to their children," said Ritter. "It's one thing to encourage children to eat healthy and pack healthy lunches, but if we aren't also leading healthy lifestyles and encouraging others to do the same, we're sending a mixed message."

Set an example:

- Be a good role model by eating healthy food at home. Believe it or not, they do watch what you eat, too.

- Talk to your children about good nutrition and making healthy choices. Explain that a nutritious lunch will give them the energy to finish the rest of the school day and enjoy after school activities.

- Ask your children to help with planning and packing lunches. By including them in lunch preparations, they will learn about healthy lunch options.

- Support nutrition standards for all foods in school. Encourage school administration to include healthy foods in school vending machines.

- Keep your pantry and refrigerator stocked with nutrient-rich foods, such as fruits and vegetables, which are full of vitamins and minerals. Whole grain foods are a good source of fiber and low-fat milk products provide calcium and vitamin D, important nutrients to build healthy bones and muscles.

To learn more:

Ohio Action for Healthy Kids is offering two free programs for parents interested in learning more about ways they can advocate for health and wellness in our schools.

Healthy Kids Excel in School: A Parent Program

October 9, 6:30-8:30 p.m.
Union County Services Building
940 London Ave.
Marysville, OH 43040

-or-

October 15, 6:30-8:30 p.m.
American Cancer Society Division
Office, 5555 Frantz Rd.
Dublin, OH 43017

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for more information.

Experts from the Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition at Nationwide Children's Hospital provided the information for this column.