

Junk Food a Weighty Issue

Premier Gordon Campbell says that public schools in BC will not be able to sell junk food by the Spring of 2007, two years earlier than planned. He must have read the research that our kids are becoming more overweight than ever before. Schools are concerned that they will have a hard time raising extra money if they can't sell fries and pop anymore. Even so, everyone agrees that this is an essential step to help keep our kids healthy.

I asked my client, an athletic teenage boy, what he thought of his school cafeteria changing their menu. He quickly replied, "That's okay, there are two pizza places down the street [from my school]". While I applaud the decision to have healthy foods in all school cafeterias, I remind parents that healthy eating starts at home. Kids usually prefer fast food, so we need to make healthy meals the easy choice for kids both at home and at school.

It can be a battle to make sure your kids have time for breakfast in the morning, so here are some quick breakfast ideas: cereal with extra nuts on top, whole grain bagel with peanut butter, fruit and yogurt with mueslix, or a toasted egg and cheese sandwich. These breakfasts will give them the energy they need to last until lunchtime.

Get your kids involved in packing their own lunch and snacks. Keep a drawer stocked with all the lunch essentials: fresh fruit, crackers or rice cakes, yogurt, plastic spoons, sandwich fixings (leftover chicken or roast beef, mustard, pre-washed lettuce and tomatoes, buns or bread), cheese strings, mini carrots, celery sticks, bell peppers or snow peas. Try not to rely on granola bars, because they are loaded with sugar and fat and contain few nutrients.

Everyone is so busy with their after school activities that it is often hard to find time to make dinner and eat together. Research shows that when families eat dinner together, meals are more nutritious, kids do better in school and they have fewer behavioral problems. Dinner doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be there. Try to include green vegetables at every dinner; for example, sauté celery, mushrooms and bell peppers into the pasta sauce, add frozen peas and green beans into the rice, serve raw vegetables and dip with pizza or have a salad with the burgers.

It's perfectly healthy to have junk food sometimes, but let it be a treat, not an every day thing. Depriving kids of junk food can make them want it even more, so that they feel guilty or ashamed when they do have it. These feelings can lead to unhealthy dieting and poor body image. For this reason, I like to keep cookies and ice cream in the house for balance and good measure. I encourage parents to talk about nutrition with their kids and to support them to make their own choices.

Cristina Sutter is a Registered Dietitian at Satori Integrative Health Centre. She teaches the Sports Nutrition courses at UBC and SFU. For more information, call 604.274.7224 or visit www.satoriintegrativehealth.com.