

Nutrition for Elementary School Age Children

Are you worried about your elementary school aged child's eating habits? When children begin school, they are faced with many new experiences and challenges. One of these new experiences is eating lunch, and sometimes breakfast, at school. They will be making more of their own decisions about what foods to choose and how much to eat. This is a great time to teach them about what makes up a healthy diet and why eating a variety of foods is important for good health.



❖ **Encourage your child to eat breakfast every day, whether at school or at home.** Without breakfast, many children become hungry mid-morning. This can affect their concentration. Even short-term lack of food can affect brain function. Cereal with milk is fast and nutritious and costs less than 50 cents per serving. Non-traditional breakfast, such as soft pretzels, string cheese and leftover cold pizza, may appeal to children who don't normally like to eat breakfast.

❖ **Encourage your child to choose and drink low fat or fat-free milk with meals.**

The calcium in milk builds strong bones and teeth and the vitamin D added to milk helps the body absorb calcium. Strong dense bones now may help prevent osteoporosis, or serious bone loss, later in life.

❖ **Encourage your child to choose and eat fruits and vegetables each day.** Five or more servings are recommended for all ages. The vitamins and minerals fruits and vegetables contain include vitamin C, which helps cuts and bruises heal, and vitamin A from beta carotene. Vitamin A is important for healthy vision. Although a vitamin supplement could supply vitamins C and A, there are many other things in fruits and vegetables which scientists feel are important for good health, such as the pigments which give the fruits and vegetables their color. These are called phytochemicals and research indicates they may play a role in lowering our risk of cancer and heart disease later in life.

❖ **Encourage your child to eat foods from the meat and protein group each day.** Protein is important for building muscle. Foods from this group are our best sources of iron. Elementary school is a busy time for children and choosing to eat foods high in iron will help insure that they have the energy to work and play. (Note: Too much iron can be fatal, so be sure to keep iron containing vitamin pills – especially those that taste like candy – out of the reach of children.)

❖ **Limit the "extras" your child is allowed to purchase at school, such as ice cream and fruit-flavored beverages.** These are not a part of the school lunch program and provide many calories with few nutrients.

❖ **Find out what time your child's class eats lunch and stop by and have lunch with him occasionally.** You may have to reserve a lunch in advance, but it's a learning experience to go through the lunch line yourself and sample the food. It's also good to talk to your child and his schoolmates about their food preferences.

Early elementary students are often encouraged to bring a snack to school. Shop with your child to choose a variety of nutritious snacks. An insulated lunch bag with an ice pack is a good investment because your child can take a greater variety of foods to school (perishable foods should not be at room temperature more than 2 hours). Small containers of yogurt, carrots and dip, fruit salad, applesauce, and pretzels are good snack choices. Be sure to stock up on plastic spoons.

Children often arrive home from school or after school programs ready to eat whatever is handy. Candy, cookies, chips – the nonperishables which are ready to eat in the pantry – are often the snack of choice. While these foods can fit into a healthy diet, eating them too close to meal-time can decrease your child's appetite for the nutritious foods you serve. Limit the amount of these snack foods you keep on hand. Instead, make sure to have more nutritious, easy-to-eat snack choices available, such as cheese and crackers, frozen low fat yogurt, grapes, bananas, peaches and other fresh fruit, and ready-to-eat carrots with low fat salad dressing as a dip.

On the days that your child chooses to pack her lunch, encourage her to pack the lunch herself and include foods from at least three food groups. For a beverage, milk can often be purchased at school.

Elementary school is a time when children start making more of their own decisions about food. Helping them get off to a good start nutrition wise can influence their health later in life. For more information on the Food Guide Pyramid or more information on nutrition for children, contact your local Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent.

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Gail Hanula, Eds, RD, LD Extension Nutrition-EFNEP Specialist
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