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Thinking Outside The Lunchbox

Trying To Sneak Nutritious Food Into Your Child's School Lunch? Help Is Here.



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by Deborah S. Hartz

School's back in session and that means packing lunches for the kids.

By now you're probably aware of widespread concerns over childhood nutrition. Nearly 10 million youngsters ages 6 to 19 -- nearly three times the number in 1980 -- carry excess fat that can lead to hypertension, stroke, cancer, diabetes, heart ailments, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, sleep disorders and other conditions formerly confined to grownups. Yet you still may struggle to make your kids give up the processed, high fat, sweet things they've gotten used to eating.

Learning to eat right is a process of change, little by little," says Meryl Brandwein. "Each week change one thing about what you eat. Try to take information and make changes slowly."

Brandwein, a registered dietitian who lives in Weston, is the mother of Jason, 8, Lindsay, 6, and Ashley, 4, as well as the owner of Deliciously Healthy in Sunrise. And she is helping her clients eat whole foods by delivering to them prepared meals made from natural ingredients (made without white flour, additives or preservatives and using only wild seafood and antibiotic-free meats) that are organic and sustainable whenever possible.

She knows how difficult menu planning and getting kids to eat right can be.

"You can take what your kids eat and make it healthier or buy natural versions of it," she says. We asked her to share some ideas. "Playing around with what your kids usually eat and adding healthful ingredients can make all the difference in the world," she says.

Registered dietitian Meryl Brandwein offers these tips for adding nutrition to your children's mealtime favorites.

Peanut butter and jelly: "It's a great option," Brandwein says. For those who don't suffer from peanut allergies, of course. But instead of jelly, how much better to make it with peanut butter, sliced bananas and honey. Or top the peanut butter with sliced apples and honey on whole-grain bread (made with real whole-grain flour not just enriched flour). Or better yet, make any sandwich on sprouted grain bread.

Tuna fish: Mix tuna with light canola mayonnaise and add some shredded carrots, chopped celery and flax oil (it contains omega 3 fatty acids that may help prevent heart disease, stroke and cancer).

Chicken salad: Mix it with light canola mayo and add nuts and grapes for more nutrition.

Yogurt with sprinkles: You can do a lot better if you buy vanilla yogurt and let your child mix it with a crunchy natural cereal such as granola plus dried fruit (raisins, dried cranberries) and a sprinkling of cinnamon.

Snacks: Try packing baked potato chips or pretzels if children like salty things. Edamame or green soybeans are fun for kids to eat. Just steam them and let the kids pop them out of their shells.

Macaroni and cheese: Make it more nutritious by adding chopped broccoli, carrots or spinach to the cheese sauce.

Meatballs or meat sauce: Add shredded carrots, zucchini or potatoes or chopped spinach or flax meal to the meatball mixture or meat sauce. That's one way to get kids to eat more veggies and fiber and they won't even notice them. Serve it with spaghetti squash instead of pasta, suggests