

The Healthy School Lunchbox

We live in a world becoming increasingly more hectic, with demanding schedules, busy social lives, and seemingly unceasing activity. At the same time, we want to be active and involved in our children's lives, to be there when they need us, and to do everything we can to nurture and protect them. One of the best ways we can do this is to provide them with every opportunity for their optimum health. Apart from affording them a warm, loving, and secure environment in which to live, we need to nourish and sustain them with pure, fresh foods. At no other time in our lives is food selection more important than during our childhood. This is the time when the foundation of our health is laid down, the very building blocks upon which we can build strength and vitality to last us our lifetime. It is very important to also remember that eating habits developed during these formative years last a lifetime.

Fresh, natural foods foster vigorous health and well-being and allow our children to reach their highest potential. Costly and detrimental to their health are convenience foods loaded with preservatives, chemicals and inappropriate fats and sugars.

III-Health In Epidemic Proportions

In Australia the incidence of childhood obesity is growing in epidemic proportions - 27% of our children are overweight and 5% are obese, a fourfold increase over 20 years. Today, our children are suffering more than ever before from asthma, diabetes, allergies, AHDD, and chronic depression. Even the common cold is more prevalent in our children than ever before. At the same time our society is relying more and more on nutritionally empty and chemically laden convenience foods.

Studies to date show that, even though there is an amazing abundance of fresh, natural foods available to us, we are increasingly spurning this in favour of manufactured foods. Ninety percent of money spent on food in the United States is spent on processed food, and an Australian national nutrition survey in

1995 found that 40% of children ate no fruit and 30% no vegetables and only 25% drank water! According to some estimates, children consume roughly 375g of artificial colouring a year & much higher if they eat a lot of junk food.

What Can We Do?

One of the first ways we can help turn this around in our own families is to seriously look at the way we feed ourselves and our children. What percentage of *our* food dollar goes on natural foods and how much is spent on manufactured foods? How much of what we offer our children is truly health giving? How much of what we provide in our children's school lunchbox is natural and will nourish and sustain them throughout the day? How much is empty, high in fats and will do nothing for them but distort their palates and their natural instincts for fresh, natural food? Many processed foods, high in fats, sugars, and salt, are addictive and the more we eat them and the more we offer them to our children, the more we all seem to want. We need only to give up these foods for a very short while in order to break this cycle. If we wish our children to grow up enjoying the tastes of real food, we need to provide the environment for them to do so. If we want our children to appreciate music, we play beautiful music for them. If we want our children to be active, we teach them the joys of sport and activity. The same is true of food. Provide fresh and delicious food to them and their appreciation of good food will almost happen by default.

The School Lunchbox

Start by filling the child's lunchbox with the natural foods they prefer. Concentrate on their favourite fruits, give them rice, pasta or soup, carrot and celery sticks, cherry tomatoes, avocado, cucumber, sprouts, mushrooms, lots of wholegrain, life sustaining breads, homemade dips, corn on the cob, hard boiled eggs, sugar free muesli, home made popcorn, pure yoghurt, dried fruit, nuts and seeds. For the child with a gourmet palate try sushi, dolmades, olives and sun dried tomatoes with cheese and crusty bread. Give them anything they want as long as it is natural and will nourish and sustain them. The things to avoid are all processed food (especially portion control foods that heavily marketed to children), such as snack items, roll ups, chocolates, sweet biscuits, cakes, muesli bars, chips, shapes etc as these foods will only distract them, and at a cost, from the healthier choices in their lunchbox. Also, try to avoid the juice boxes. If children have 2-3 reasonable servings of fresh fruit every day they don't need the added synthetic Vitamin C found in commercial fruit juices and they get all the healthy fibre as well. A bottle of frozen, filtered water is all they need and it will help keep their fresh food cool and crisp.

Let's Stick Together

The business of parenting can be a tough and demanding job, and sometimes the decisions about how we prioritise can be very difficult. However, one

of the greatest gifts we can give our children is vibrant good health and to do this we need to make the commitment to spend some of our valuable time in preparing and providing nourishing, fresh food for our children. If, as parents, we can work together and consciously make these small but important changes in the way we feed our children, then perhaps they will stop asking for the high fat, high sugar, high salt, processed food. If none of their friends have the packaged 'treats' then they may not seem so attractive anymore. However, perhaps the big bonus, for us, for the teachers and for themselves, will be that the children will work better, be more focussed, have better concentration, and be happier in the classroom.

Jacqi Deighan is a Melbourne based children's food educator who runs Natural Kitchen Strategies, a business which aims to help parents get their children excited by real food. She has recently released a CD for parents. At \$34.95 it is an invaluable resource packed with information on everything from feeding babies and toddlers right through to teenagers, healthy breakfast, lunchbox and snack ideas and the pros and cons of common foods. To purchase you can contact Jacqi on 03 9500 8003 or visit her website www.naturalkitchenstrategies.com.au.