

Navigating The School Cafeteria

What Kinds Of Choices Do Kids Really Have And How Can Parents Help Them Make The Right Ones?

(NAPSA)—As our nation's kids are back in school consuming one to two cafeteria meals a day, it's important for all of us to realize that childhood obesity is a huge, nationwide epidemic that's only getting worse. According to the CDC, 1 out of 3 kids is overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. While parents can encourage their children to eat healthfully when they're home, what kind of options do they have at school? Nutritionist Alison Eastwood, RD has tips for parents to help their kids make the right choices.

"The first thing parents and kids need to know is what they're up against. Parents don't realize that many schools are paid lots of money by big companies, such as soda manufacturers, to make sure that only their snacks and beverages are sold in the cafeteria and vending machines," said Eastwood. "More than 30 percent of kids are overweight and it's due in part to the fact that kids don't have access to healthy foods and beverages."

To help combat obesity now and to prevent serious health problems down the road, such as diabetes and heart disease, parents should advise their kids to avoid the following items:

- Heavily processed snacks, such as chips, candy bars and cookies. Processed snacks are chock-full of hidden fats, sodium and sugars.

- Soft drinks. Regular soda is high in sugar and caffeine, as well as artificial colors and flavors. Also, what some parents don't realize is that diet soda is just as bad, if not worse. Diet drinks are full of artificial sweeteners, which research studies are linking more and more to obesity. These sweeteners trick our bodies into thinking they're actually ingesting



Tray full of healthy options for kids.

something sweet and hence create further sweet cravings, ultimately boosting our kids' daily calorie intake.

- Sports drinks and juices. Across the nation, school districts are replacing sodas with sports drinks and juices to cater to growing concerns regarding the obesity epidemic. Many parents and kids don't know that sports drinks are packed with unnecessary sodium and artificial flavors; and juices, while healthier, are still very high in sugar and calories and often over-processed.

Instead, parents should encourage their kids to pick out healthy, but still tasty colorful options:

- Fruits and vegetables are sound nutritious solutions. High in fiber, foods like strawberries and carrots also contain antioxidants, which are nutrients that protect against chronic diseases and contribute to good overall health.

- Healthy beverages such as water, or even vitaminwater, which is a natural, low-calorie enhanced water that is packed with nutrients that our kids need and tastes great, which kids love.

- Simple sandwiches, like the classic turkey, are still top sellers in school cafeterias. Choosing lean meats and whole-grain bread packs an extra nutritional punch.

- Healthy sides such as low-fat yogurt or even baked chips or soy chips are quick and healthy choices that aren't packed with artificial ingredients or trans fats.

According to Eastwood, there are lots of things parents can do to get healthier options into their child's school cafeteria and vending machines. "Parents can start by talking to the key decision makers at their child's school and urge them to provide healthier foods and beverages," says Eastwood. "All over the country, concerned educators, parents and lawmakers are rallying for change. Parents can also take their kids to the grocery store to learn what kinds of foods they like. Together, they can pick out healthy snacks to take along to school and supplement their cafeteria meals. If kids learn to make smart food choices now, they'll become healthier adults later in life."