

The School Lunch Just Got Even Healthier

Now how do we get kids to eat it?

Even the healthiest foods are only healthy if they are actually eaten. When you first serve a fruit or vegetable, you may not get the reaction you desire. But the good news is that kids will and do eat healthy foods. Sometimes it just takes a little creativity on the part of parents or schools. Below are some ideas to help.

- Offer healthy options over and over and over and over and... Children are naturally resistant to new foods. They may not be interested in trying unfamiliar foods or may not enjoy what they try the first time around. Don't assume that just because they didn't eat it once they won't eat it ever again. Reintroduce foods every once in a while and expect that it might take 3, 5, even 7 or more introductions for children to develop an acceptance of new school foods.
- Offer samples. Many schools (and parents!) have found that taste tests of new menu items helps increase sales of those foods. One school offers "Try It Tuesdays," where a sample of new food is offered along with more familiar foods.
- Involve young people in menu development or even food preparation (have them vote on new menu items, hold discussion groups, discuss at a student council meeting). Children may resist changes, but if they understand the reason for the changes and get to help choose the new foods, they will be more open to new selections. A number of schools have "junior chef" contests where winning student recipes are added to the menu.
- Do as I do...not as I say. It's easy to tell young people to eat healthier foods, but if we're telling them and not showing them, we're less likely to be effective. One of the most valuable things 'grown ups' can do is to eat the fruits and vegetables and other new healthier items we want our kids to eat. This type of modeling encourages kids to try new foods, especially when they see adults enjoying them so much!
- Hungry kids will eat healthy foods if those are the options available. If you give a child the option between an apple or a cookie, most will choose a cookie. But if you give them a choice between an apple and grapes, they will choose an apple or grapes – and both are great options! One of the tricks to getting kids to try and enjoy healthy foods is to avoid presenting them against unhealthy options. Whether it is at school or at home, if we surround children with healthy choices, they will learn to choose and eat healthy foods.
- A little marketing can go a long way. Try giving foods fun and attractive names, presenting them in attractive ways, and making them more appealing. Place healthy options in areas that are readily visible and accessible to kids. For example, offer fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy at the start of the line as well as at point of purchase so that they take them first or can be 'reminded' to grab one just before they leave. One school that physically moved their salad bar so students passed it before they went to the front of the serving line reports an encouraging increase in students choosing those items.
- It's OK to encourage but try not to obsess. Letting children know that something is delicious and good for them and encouraging them to try a bite is a good way to get them to warm up to a new food. But if we focus too much on 'making' them eat what they don't want, it is more likely to become a battle of wills and less likely to result in them actually eating healthier options.

