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There's Homework to Do on School Lunches

By *JANE E. BRODY*

Nutritionists and health-conscious parents applauded when last year the Department of Agriculture finally set new standards for the nation's school lunches in an effort to foster good health and counter the epidemic of [obesity](#) afflicting youngsters.

The makeover - the first major improvement in the nutritional quality of school meals in 15 years - expands access to fresh fruits and vegetables for children at lunch and snack time. For the first time, both fruits and vegetables must be served daily and should make up two-thirds of lunch.

Depending on the child's age, daily fruit servings range from half a cup to a full cup, and daily vegetables from three-fourths of a cup to one cup. The amount of meat or meat alternative should be the size of the palm of a child's hand. At least half of grains should be whole, milk must be nonfat or 1 percent, and only nonfat milk can be flavored.

This is a vast improvement over the mystery dishes loaded with fat and flour and the mushy, overcooked vegetables that long defined school lunch. Having seen the offerings when my sons were in school, I chose to give them lunch from home until they went off to college. They learned that foods that were good for them could also taste good, a lesson retained for nearly 40 years.

But the new school lunch menu, it seems, is not going down well with many school-age diners, who are [tossing the mandated fruits and vegetables into the garbage](#) or refusing school lunch altogether. Instead, they are choosing competitive foods sold in the cafeteria or buying lunch from vending machines and snack bars in school or from outside purveyors, where the typical choices include chips, candy, cookies, pizza, hot dogs, burgers, fries and sugary soft drinks.

In a 2010 study, published in what was then called *The Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that among a representative sample of 4,322 students in 73 Florida middle schools, [18 percent bought a snack or beverage from a vending machine two or more times a week](#) instead of school lunch.

Breaking Old Habits

Of course, no matter the menu, schoolchildren have long been known to discard some or all of the food they are served at lunch and to grab some sweet or caloric snack to suppress their hunger. Even those who bring lunch from home often trade or give away the most nutritious items that caring parents put in their lunchboxes. But complaints about school lunch and resulting waste have clearly escalated with the revised meal plan. Despite decades of education about healthy eating, too many American children still snub their noses at fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans and peas.

There are many possible reasons for this sad turn of events.

Many parents, pressed for time, money or both, don't introduce their children to foods that foster good [nutrition](#) and a healthy weight, allowing them instead to feast mainly on produce-poor [fast foods](#) that are high in fat, [calories](#) and salt.

When families rely on packaged or store-prepared meals, children grow up familiar with the Golden Arches but know little about where foods come from, how they are prepared and how delicious fresh foods can be. And with family meals only a sometime event in many households, children don't get to learn by example from seeing what their parents eat.

Instead of expecting children to eat what is set before them, as most did in my generation, parents have become short-order cooks, serving children only what they like. Yet studies have shown that children typically require repeated exposure to once-rejected foods before they acquire a taste for them.

Few schools provide inviting introductions to the changes in school lunch and don't prepare the new foods in tasty, attractive ways that might tempt reluctant diners.

Changes at Home and School

All is not lost. It may take time, but with sensible and consistent strategies at home and in school, children can adjust to the changes in the lunch program and learn to enjoy them.

Acceptance necessarily starts with the foods and drinks that are purchased and served at home. Hungry children will naturally go for what is readily available, so stock the cupboard with good-for-you fare. When my sons were toddlers, I decreed that vending machines were off limits, and they soon stopped asking for whatever was in them.

Chips, cookies and soda were not on my weekly shopping list, purchased only for special occasions like parties and trips. Instead, a bowl of fresh fruit sat on the table, a fresh fruit salad was front and center in the fridge, and the top shelf held nonfat milk, orange juice and water. If children are given a choice between an apple or a cookie, most will choose the latter. The choice should be between an apple or grapes, for example.

For an after-school snack, the boys got milk with a homemade low-fat, low-sugar muffin or quick bread (baked in big batches and frozen). While dinner was being prepared, they snacked on cut carrots, celery and cucumbers with a low-fat dip. A bowl of Wheaties with raisins and milk was their usual bedtime snack.

Whenever possible, take children to the grocery store or, better yet, a farmers' market and talk about the different choices and why you are making them.

Have the children help prepare meals - if they've made it, they'll be more likely to eat it. Even a toddler can add grapes or cherry tomatoes to a salad bowl.

Take an extra minute to present foods attractively, say, by arranging fresh vegetables and fruits in an appealing design. I made a face on oatmeal with raisins and apple slices for my toddlers. And I gave some foods playful names, like "baby tree" for broccoli.

But schools, too, have work to do. When children learn about foods in the classroom and have hands-on experience with them, they are more likely to eat them in the lunchroom.

How about restoring kitchens run by well-trained cooks who know how to prepare nutritious and inviting meals, and offering cooking classes to boys and girls starting in the first grade? Schools today are so focused on stuffing children's heads with facts and figures they have forgotten that a good mind needs a well-nourished (and well-exercised) body.

Student groups can be formed to consult with the lunchroom staff, and special days, like "Try-It Tuesdays," created to give children a chance to sample new foods and make suggestions for improvements.

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