



After-School Snacks

It's a scene that plays out daily in homes everywhere. Kids come in from school and head straight to the kitchen looking for something to eat. How can you make sure your child gets nourished but still has room for a healthy dinner? Read on.

Though kids need less frequent snacks as they get older, it's not surprising that most are hungry after school. Many kids eat lunch early — 11:30 or even before — and then have an afternoon of classes and maybe even an after-school activity before their next chance to eat. It's no wonder the snack food vending machine looks so appealing at the end of the day.

Depending on your child's age and after-school routine, you may not always be able to control what he or she eats in the late afternoon. But don't throw in the towel just yet. Take these steps to guide your child to good after-school snacks that will be satisfying and still leave room for a nutritious dinner.

Figure Out the Timing

Put yourself in your child's shoes and consider his or her eating schedule on a normal weekday. Some younger kids may have a mid-morning snack, but most older school-age kids will not. Get the answers to these questions: When is lunchtime? What and how much does your child eat at lunch? Does your child ever skip lunch? Does your child get a snack at his or her after-school program? This will help you figure out how hungry will your child be when he or she gets home.

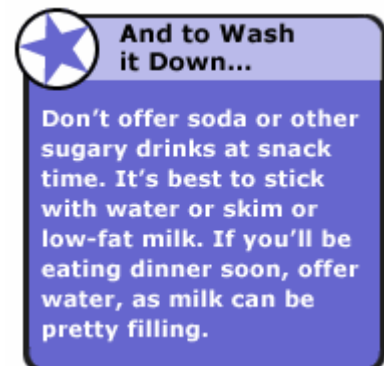
You'll also want to think about what time you normally serve dinner. A child who gets home famished at 3 and eats a large snack probably won't be hungry if dinner is at 5:30. Likewise, it may not be reasonable to expect a child whose parents work late to go until 7:30 with nothing to eat since lunch. Think about your child's schedule and plan accordingly.

Create a List of Healthy Options

Next, talk about which snacks your child would like to have at snack time. Come up with a list of healthy options together and be sure to include a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. While a slice of cake or some potato chips shouldn't be forbidden foods, such low-nutrient snacks shouldn't be on the everyday after-school menu.

If you can, take your child along to the grocery store and spend some time reading the nutrition facts labels and comparing products. Pay attention to the amounts of protein, fiber, calcium, and other important nutrients, and don't miss the chance to talk about portion sizes. Together, choose snacks that are low in sugar, fat, and salt. Being involved in the process makes it more likely that your child will learn to make healthy food choices.

Make Healthy Snacks an Easy Choice



Don't expect kids — even teens — to cut up their own veggie sticks. It's just too much bother, especially when they're hungry. Kids are more inclined to eat what's handy. That's where you come in. Make healthy snacks easily available by packing them in their lunchboxes or backpacks or by having them visible and ready-to-eat at home.

If you're at home after school, a young child might enjoy helping you make a creative snack like ants on a log (celery topped with peanut butter and raisin "ants"), egg boats (hard-boiled egg wedges topped with a cheese sail), or fruit kabobs. Older kids may enjoy a fruit smoothie, mini-pitas with hummus dip, or whole-grain crackers topped with cheese and pear slices.

Older kids often like making their own snacks, so provide the ingredients and a few simple instructions. If dinner is just around the corner, consider allowing a "first course," such as a small salad or side vegetable while you finish preparing the family meal.

For those nights when dinner is hours away, you could opt for a more substantial snack such as half a sandwich or a quesadilla made with a whole-wheat tortilla, low-fat cheese, and salsa warmed in the microwave. Nothing too complicated, though. A good snack should take more time to eat than it does to prepare!

If your child goes to an after-school program or to a caregiver's house, find out if snacks are served. If so, what's typically offered? If you don't like what you hear, suggest alternatives or just pack an extra snack your child can eat after school. Lower-fat granola bars made with whole grains are a good choice.

Other options include trail mix, nuts, low-sugar dry cereal, whole-grain mini-muffins, and dried fruits. These types of foods are especially helpful if your child plays a sport after school and needs a quick energy boost.

What if your child comes home to an empty house? Again, the best strategy is to leave something healthy front and center on the kitchen counter or in the refrigerator. A hungry child, like a hungry adult, is likely to take the path of least resistance.

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