

Taking the stress out of back-to-school

By Emily Harris

Summer is in full swing, but parents know that the school year is just around the corner. Juggling work schedules and family time can be a challenging enough; when you add school back into the mix, life can get even more hectic.

Parents have to figure out when they'll do the back-to-school shopping, meal planning, doctor's visits . . . and how this will fit into their schedules. And, in some cases, there's the challenge of finding after-school care.

Eating healthy during hectic times can be a challenge, too. What can you do to encourage healthy eating habits? Help your child develop those habits now. It sounds much harder than it is, says Melinda Johnson, MS, RD, a dietician in private practice and a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "Remember, the division of responsibility for feeding children: Adults are responsible for serving a variety of healthy food in a structured way (meaning meals and snacks), and children are responsible for deciding how much to eat."

Have an action plan

One way to start your child on the path to healthy eating while cutting down on your stress level and kitchen time is by having them help as you plan their school meals. "Guide him toward thinking of hitting at least three food groups for lunch," Johnson suggests. Make a list of what your child likes, she says, and focus on hitting those food groups. Ask your child to update the list by crossing off foods he may be tired of and adding new foods that he tried and liked.

"The list will be helpful in those crunch times because you don't even have to think about what to pack—you just pick from the list," she says.

Having a list is part of having a plan. "Good nutrition never happens by accident, it always takes a little planning," she says. "The more planning you can put in ahead of time, the easier it is to eat healthy when time is at a premium."

Set up a planning day and use it to decide the week's menu and make a grocery list around that menu. Ask your family for input to make sure they get the food they want, she says.

Kids at any age should be involved in their meal planning, Johnson says. "Even the youngest kids can tell you what kind of sandwich they prefer, how they like it cut, and if they want grapes or orange slices."

With guidance from mom or dad to make sure they're hitting the food groups, older kids can pack their own lunches, she says.

What about snacks? A snack should represent two food groups—string cheese and fruit, for example. " 'Snack' does not mean 'treat.' Although you can occasionally serve a treat for a snack, snacks should more often be a mini-meal," she says. If your child likes peanut butter, try serving it with carrot and celery sticks or apple slices.

Don't feel guilty on the days that you're in a time crunch. Cafeteria food has come a long way since you wondered what that gravy was hiding. "If your school is on the national school lunch program, they are required to follow certain guidelines," Johnson says. "They will typically bake kid-friendly items rather than fry, serve milk with meals and serve side items that are healthy, like baby carrots."

Know what's being served, she says. "School lunch is a learning opportunity for your child—it's probably the first time he is on his own, making decisions on what to eat."

What a pain

Back-to-school season is a double-dose of pain: Children are losing their freedom and they may have to go in for immunizations.

It's best to check with your pediatrician or your state's health department for immunization requirements. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, these vaccines are needed for kids ages 4 to 6: diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DTaP); pneumococcal (PPV); inactivated poliovirus (IPV); influenza; measles, mumps, rubella (MMR); varicella; hepatitis A series (HepA Series); and meningococcal (MCV4). For more information, see www.cdc.gov/vaccines/recs/schedules/child-schedule.htm#printable.

Home safety

If your child will be at home alone, have a plan, says Robert Sege, MD, PhD, FAAP, Professor of Pediatrics, Boston University School of Medicine, and that plan should include an adult who is closer to home than mom or dad.

A lot of parents think having their kids call their cell phone is a fail-safe plan, Dr. Sege says. But your kids may need a person who can get to them quickly to physically help them, he says.

"On our fridge we have the names and phone numbers of three close neighbors, and chances are one of those is going to be home most of the time," he says. "The neighbors never minded and we did the same thing for them. And we have had kids over at our house when they get locked out of their home."

Dr. Sege suggests looking into after-school programs, either run through the school or run by the local YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs or churches, instead of having your child be at home alone.

Remember, planning meals and after-school activities can be fun and teach your child valuable lessons. ■

Clip and go!

Tax-free dates:

North Carolina: Aug. 1–3.

Clothing, footwear, and school supplies of \$100 or less per item; school instructional materials of \$300 or less per item; sports and recreation equipment of \$50 or less per item, computers of \$3,500 or less per item; and computer supplies of \$250 or less per item will be exempt.

Virginia: Aug. 1–3.

During this three-day period, purchases of qualifying school supplies selling for \$20 or less per item, and purchases of qualifying clothing and footwear selling for \$100 or less per item will be exempt from sales tax.

Kitchen aid:

- Cook in big batches and freeze meals in serving-size containers
- Chop veggies ahead of time or buy pre-chopped frozen staples
- Marinate meat ahead of time
- Pre-cut veggies or baby carrots are ready to go
- Read labels: Many convenience items are high in fat and sodium