

Serving Healthy Snacks to Children

Adapted from an article by the Center for Science in the Public Interest by Partners for a Healthier Community in keeping with its nutrition recommendations that emphasize whole, unprocessed foods.

Serving healthy snacks to children is important to providing good nutrition, supporting lifelong healthy eating habits, and helping to prevent costly and potentially-disabling diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, and obesity. Snacks play a major and growing role in children's diets. Between 1977 and 1996, the number of calories that children consumed from snacks increased by 120 calories per day.

Below are ideas for teachers, caregivers, program directors, and parents for serving healthy snacks and beverages to children in the classroom, in after-school programs, at soccer games, and elsewhere. Some ideas may be practical for large groups of children, while other ideas may only work for small groups, depending on the work and cost involved.

Fruits and Vegetables



Most of the snacks served to children should be fruits and vegetables, since most kids do not eat the recommended five to thirteen servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Eating fruits and vegetables lowers the risk of heart disease, cancer, and high blood pressure. Fruits and vegetables also contain important nutrients like vitamins A and C and fiber.

Serving fresh fruits and vegetables can seem challenging.

However, good planning and the growing number of shelf-stable fruits and vegetable products on the market make it easier. Though some think fruits and vegetables are costly snacks, they are actually less costly than many other less-healthy snacks on a per-serving basis. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average cost of a serving of fruit or vegetable (all types – fresh, frozen, and canned) is 25 cents per serving. This is a good deal compared with a 69-cent single-serve bag of potato chips or an 80-cent candy bar. Try lots of different fruits and vegetables and prepare them in various ways to find out what your kids like best.

Fruits



Fruit is naturally sweet, so most kids love it. Fruit can be served whole, sliced, cut in half, cubed, or in wedges. Canned, frozen, and dried fruits often need little preparation. Because grapes and bananas are high in

sugar, they are not included in this list, but other whole fruits served without added sugar are fine:

- Apples (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Apricots (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Blackberries
- Blueberries
- Cantaloupe (pre-cut)
- Cherries
- Grapefruit (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Honeydew Melon (pre-cut)
- Kiwis (cut in half and give each child a spoon to eat it)
- Mandarin Oranges (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Mangoes (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Nectarines (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Oranges (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Peaches (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Pears (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Pineapple (pre-cut)
- Plums
- Raspberries
- Strawberries
- Tangerines (best if pre-cut for small children)
- Watermelon (pre-cut)

Fruit Salad. Get kids to help make a fruit salad. Use a variety of colored fruits to add to the appeal.

Vegetables



Vegetables can be served raw with dip or salad dressing:

- Broccoli
- Carrot sticks or Baby Carrots
- Cauliflower
- Celery Sticks
- Cucumber
- Peppers (green, red, or yellow)
- Snap Peas
- Snow Peas
- String Beans
- Tomato slices or grape or cherry tomatoes
- Yellow Summer Squash slices
- Zucchini slices

flavors), salsa, or peanut butter.

Dips. Try full-fat Ranch or Thousand Island dressing, bean dips, guacamole, hummus (which comes in dozens of

Salad. Make a salad or set out veggies like a salad bar and let the kids build their own salads.

Soy. Edamame (pronounced “eh-dah-MAH-may”) are fun to eat and easy to serve. (Heat frozen edamame in the microwave for about 2-3 minutes).

Healthy Whole Grains



Though most kids eat plenty of grain products, too many of those grains are cookies, snack cakes, sugary cereals, Rice Krispy treats, and other refined grains that are high in sugars. Try to serve only whole grains, which provide more fiber, vitamins, and minerals than refined grains. In addition, try to keep the added sugars to less than 35% by weight^{1,2}.

Note: Cookies, snack cakes, and chips should not be given as treats due to their poor nutritional quality.

Whole Wheat English Muffins, Pita, or Tortillas. Stuff them with veggies or dip them in hummus or bean dip.

Popcorn. Look for low-fat popcorn in a bag or microwave popcorn. Or you can air pop the popcorn and season it, *e.g.*, by spraying it with vegetable oil spray and adding parmesan cheese, garlic powder, or other non-salt spices.

1 If a food manufacturer fails to provide the added sugars content of a food item, use the percentage of weight from total sugars (in place of the percentage of weight from added sugars), and exempt fruits, vegetables, and dairy foods from this total sugars limit.

2 To calculate % sugars by weight for a food item, look at the Nutrition Facts label and divide the grams of sugars by the gram weight of one serving of the product and multiply this number by 100.

Dairy Foods



Dairy foods are a great source of calcium, which can help to build strong bones.

Yogurt. Look for brands that are low in sugars (no more than about 10 grams of sugars in a 6-oz. cup), and high in calcium (at least 25% of daily value [DV] for calcium in a 6-oz. cup). Yogurt also can be served with fresh or frozen fruit or low-fat granola.

Cheese. Cheese provides calcium. Choose Mozzarella string cheese, Kraft Twist-Ums, Laughing Cow’s Mini Babybel, or

Price-Rite brand cheeses to reduce cost.

Other Snack Ideas

Nuts. A small handful of nuts is a nutritious snack. Examples include peanuts, pistachios, almonds, walnuts, cashews, or soy nuts. Look for nuts that are unsalted.

WARNING: A small but growing number of kids have severe peanut and/or tree nut allergies. Before bringing in peanuts, peanut butter, or other nuts as a snack, check to make sure none of the children has an allergy.

Trail Mix. Commercial trail mixes are often high in added sugars. Make your own in a sealed container with peanuts, cashews, almonds, sunflower seeds, or pumpkin seeds.

Luncheon Meat. Choose turkey, ham, or roast beef cut to make snack-sized portions.

Healthy Beverages



Water. Water should be the main drink served to kids at snack times. Water satisfies thirst and does not have sugar or calories. (Plus, it is low-cost for care-givers!) If kids are used to getting sweetened beverages at snack times, it may take a little time for them to get used to drinking water. Reduce adding plastic to the waste stream by serving water in reusable plastic pitchers and paper cups. Storing tap water overnight in the refrigerator will eliminate the taste of chlorine.

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Seltzer. Carbonated drinks like seltzer, sparkling water, and club soda are healthy options. They do not contain the sugars, calories, and caffeine of sodas. Serve them alone or try making “healthy sodas” by mixing them with pieces of whole fruit.

Milk. Milk provides key nutrients, such as calcium and vitamin D. Choose whole, unflavored milk which has been shown to reduce weight gain in children.

Soy and Rice Drinks. For children who cannot to drink cow’s milk, can be given calcium-fortified soy or rice drinks if added sugar is low (under 10 grams per cup).

Fruit Juice. 100% fruit juice can be rich in vitamins, minerals, and cancer-fighting compounds, however, it is high in sugar. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children ages 1-6 years old drink no more than 6 ounces (one serving) of juice a day and children ages 7-18 years old drink no more than 12 ounces (two servings) of juice a day.