

Back-to-School Tips for Parents: “Teaching Children to Live Nutrient-Rich”

As the new school year gets underway, this is the time to teach children about making nutritious food choices wherever they are – at home or at school. Eating the nutrient-rich way can be delicious and fun. Try some of these simple tips from **food and nutrition expert Mary Abbott Hess**, LHD, MS, RD, LD, FADA, to help children eat well and learn to enjoy nutritious foods.

“Fuel up” at school:

- Encourage children to choose several wholesome, nutrient-rich foods in the cafeteria line every day, such as: brightly colored fruits and 100% fruit juices, vibrantly colored vegetables and potatoes, whole, fortified and fiber-rich grain foods, low-fat and fat-free milk, cheese and yogurt, and lean meat, skinless poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts.
- Pack sandwiches made with whole grain bread and lean meat, small containers of cut fruit or sliced vegetables, a thermos of soup or other nutrient-rich favorites.
- Take advantage of nutrient-rich vending choices in schools. For example, most schools offer low-fat and fat-free milk.
- For parties at school, bring nutrient-rich snacks most of the time – colorful veggies and dip, whole grain cereal bars, cheese cubes with fruit or whole grain crackers, strawberries with yogurt to dip, healthful snack mixes.

Shop together:

- While at the supermarket, help children choose one or two nutrient-rich snacks to pack in their lunches or as after school snacks.
- Shop the perimeter of the food market where most nutrient-rich foods can be found. Read labels to find foods that provide beneficial vitamins and minerals but are moderate in calories.
- Engage children in healthful food gathering – bring them to farmers markets, pick-your-own farms, and have a family garden or windowsill herb garden. If they pick it or grow it, they will be more likely to eat and enjoy it!
- Find a “food of the week” to try as a snack or part of a family meal. It may be a different variety of produce such as a different type of tomato or melon, a grain, or an ethnic recipe that features a new nutrient-rich ingredient.

Teach the value of food through cooking:

- Children are more likely to get excited about healthful eating when they’re part of the process. Teach children to help prepare soups, salads, pasta sauces and enlist their help when you make them. Find recipes that include nutrient-rich foods your family enjoys and prepare them often and they will become family favorites.
- Allow children to add a personal touch to their creations. For example, let kids draw a design with ketchup or mustard on a lean beef patty. Dress with their choice of vegetables, like tomato slices, avocado, cucumber, tomatillo, or lettuce.
- Have a cooking play date. When several kids come over, cook with them.
- Cooking is a life skill that children and parents can learn and enjoy together. Take a cooking class with your child!

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Make mealtime family time:

- Parents and caregivers should provide young children with a variety of healthful foods. As children develop and participate in food selection, children should be encouraged to choose nutrient-rich options most of the time.
- Make family mealtimes a priority. Eating together as a family can be at any meal. If schedules don't allow family dinners, eat together at breakfast, weekend brunch, or picnics.
- Parents can encourage children to participate in menu planning and preparation of family meals. Let each child plan one breakfast, lunch and dinner each month. They can choose the menu, help with the shopping, cooking and serving the meal.
- Children love to learn about other cultures through foods. Have some family meals at ethnic restaurants. Use these opportunities to introduce new flavorful and nutrient-rich options that are in many ethnic dishes.

Explore Nutrient-rich Resources Online:

- Encourage your kids to learn what nutrient-rich foods are with cool tools and resources on the Web:
 - Get a personalized eating plan based on MyPyramid recommendations at:
<http://www.mypyramid.gov/mypyramid/index.aspx>
 - Play the interactive "MyPyramid Blast Off" game that teaches kids about fueling their bodies with nutritious foods from each food group and physical activity every day:
<http://www.mypyramid.gov/kids/index.html>
 - Search for great-tasting nutrient-rich recipes, meal ideas, tips and tools to take the guesswork out of healthy eating at www.NutrientRichFoods.org

Tips and information provided by Mary Abbott Hess, LHD, MS, RD, LD, FADA, a partner in Culinary Nutrition Associates, LLC. She is past president of The American Dietetic Association, former chairman of The American Institute of Wine & Food, and a co-author of *A Healthy Head Start*. Recently she has coordinated a culinary elective for the Walter Payton High School in Chicago and worked with the McCormick Boys & Girls Club in establishing a children's gardening project to teach children about healthful food.

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