Food: Pack Your Kid an Awesome Veggie Lunch
Category : January/February/March 2011
Published by dharmalingam on Nov. 26, 2010

Food

Pack Your Kid an Awesome Veggie Lunch

There's no need to leave your child at the mercy of the school cafeteria; with a little creativity, you can provide a wholesome Indian meal every day

By Dr. Padmaja Patel, Midland, Texas

It's every mother's worst nightmare: her child coming home from school in tears, mercilessly ridiculed by the other children, or even accidently insulted by a teacher. My daughter Pooja recalls coming home one day from kindergarten feeling ashamed. "Embarrassed, I explained to my mother how one of my classmates had called my lunch 'disgusting.' After this encounter, Mom made a conscious effort to come up with more creative menu ideas as well as proper packing for my school lunch." Another Indian child I know was mortified when a teacher noticed spilled food from a container in his lunch box and said, "Ugh, that smells terrible."

Lunch: It's More than a Meal

Welcome to the ritual of the American school lunch, something each mother deals with for a full thirteen years per child. In elementary school, some parents just throw a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a juice box into a paper sack and send their kids off. Later, many children buy lunch in the school cafeteria. School cafeterias, however, have a justly deserved reputation for serving unhealthy foods, high in salt and fat, short on vegetables. The average cafeteria menu includes outright "junk food" items such as pepperoni and cheese pizza, popcorn, chicken, steak fingers, chicken nuggets, nachos, etc. There is little suitable for the health conscious and even less for vegetarians. Unless your school is unusual, their cafeteria is just not serving the healthy meals most Hindu mothers want their children to eat.

Among those working to bring better nutrition into the schools is Ann Cooper. As

head chef for the Berkeley, California, school district, Ms. Cooper has transformed school lunch menus. Watch her 2007 report explaining the alarming health hazards of school cafeteria food and the steps she took in Berkeley--as well as those she feels America must take as a nation--at bit.ly/school-lunches

It's important to understand something else about American schools. In middle school and high school, lunch break becomes increasingly important for the children's social life. As portrayed in the film Mean Girls, a high school cafeteria can be mapped by where, every day, the school's different social groups sit at specific tables. Schoolchildren segregate themselves in various ways: 1)by interests and abilities--athletes, nerds, "popular," delinquents, etc.; 2) by race--whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Middle Eastern; 3) by class--freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors and/or 4) by gender--boys and girls.

Just as much as who she is, what clothes she wears and where she sits, what your child eats for lunch is part of this social dynamic. Exotic Indian food from home can provoke derision and make her an outsider.

What's a Mom to Do?

Most lunches from home are simple: a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, or a cheese and meat sandwich, plus chips, an apple, a candy bar and a drink. Some time-pressed parents buy pre-made lunches from the local store called "Lunchables." These are made by Oscar Mayer, also known for its hot dogs, bologna and bacon products, and are as unhealthy as you might suspect. British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver roundly criticized Oscar Mayer's "Lunchables" on his April 23, 2010, show as part of his campaign against the use of processed foods in national schools, in both the UK and America. "I hate these things," he said. "If you want to give your kids a good nutritious lunch, you don't give them Lunchables."

But if we prepare our child a super Indian meal, our efforts may backfire. Our children may be ridiculed for bringing foods that seem unappetizing to other children unfamiliar with the aromas of the herbs and spices central to Indian cooking. Indian food is different in appearance from the foods that most kids in this country are accustomed to seeing and eating. Therefore, it is not advisable to choose exactly the same foods we serve at home. But with a bit of innovation, I believe we can prepare a lunch that is not merely acceptable, but the envy of your children's friends.

The Solution

As the mother of a teenager who refuses to eat cafeteria food, I know the challenges moms everywhere face when it comes to preparing healthy vegetarian meal options for school lunches.

Recipes can be endless, and every child has his or her own personal likes and dislikes, but one general key is to avoid packing food with a strong smell, foods that are overly greasy or oily, or food that cannot be conveniently eaten, either with utensils or with the hands. Preferably, each item should be packed individually in small, separate leak-proof containers. I bought the lunch box kit shown on page 70 for $10 at containerstore.com It's insulated, stylish and has attractive, colorful plastic containers of perfect size made from BPA-free polypropylene. High school children usually prefer a brown paper sack to a lunch box, but you can still use the same containers.

I've devised a set of lunch menu options that have proved popular with my daughter and her friends.

For an Indian style main course:

1) Parathas stuffed with aloo (spiced potato) and tofu or with spinach and paneer cheese.

2) Homemade baked (not deep fried) samosas with potato stuffing and mung and chana dal.

3) Homemade vegetable pattie (mixed veggies, potato, soy beans or chickpeas with salt, green chili, ginger and lemon) used in a grilled or toasted sandwich (bread, slice of cheese or cheese spread, green chutney (made from mint, coriander, green chillies, salt, ginger and lemon) and butter

For an international style main course:

1) Cold pasta with vegetables and chick peas and garlic bread.

2) Mexican wrap, a tomato, basil or spinach tortilla stuffed with Mexican rice, black beans, sour cream, tomatoes, lettuce, etc.

3) A rich minestrone soup and bread.

For side dishes, I include one or two of: chips, carrots and dip, fruit, cheese sticks, yogurt or cookies. And for a drink: juice, yogurt smoothie or milk.

Each meal option is nutritious, appealing and tasty. They are not only acceptable at school, I now get asked to prepare larger quantities of the items that my daughter's friends find especially enjoyable! PIpi

Padmaja Patel, MD, was born in Gujarat, India. She has lived in Texas for the last 12 years with her daughter and husband. E-mail: mrunalpadi _@_ gmail.com