



Apple by Jessie

Lunch Counts

Cynthia Birse

Getting kids to eat a well-balanced diet that offers a variety of nutrients which will help keep them healthy and at a fit weight is a difficult task for any parent, but for a family living with autism, simply getting through mealtime without a major catastrophe is often a more realistic goal.

There may be a restricted diet or food allergies to work around, a need for routines and sameness with any or every aspect of meal time, a limited menu of preferred or acceptable foods, sensory and other environmental issues such as food temperature, combinations, presentation, and rituals, and then the behavioral challenges... Well, eating a healthy, varied diet can quickly take a backseat to simple survival at meal time!

Studies show the negative effects of poor nutrition not just in our children's general health and wellness, but in their behavior, attention, and ability to learn. So, behavioral challenges may make proper nutrition impossible – and then poor nutrition causes more problem behavior.

Is there anything we can do to slow down, stop or change this?

How do you alter eating habits that have become so second nature to us and our families? Do we really want to set more limits and have to deal with saying “no?” Do our kids need yet another demand? Will it make any significant difference? Is it really worth the havoc that it will cause?

It is a given that we all want the best for our kids, and yet, there is only so much we can fit on our plates, so to speak. Here are some simple nutritional tips that might help as you pack your child's snack and lunch for school:

- If your child eats any kind of fruit at all, then pack some in their snack each day. If they do not eat whole, canned or dried fruit, then try fruit snacks made with real fruit juice.



Oranges by Holden

- Make fried foods an occasional treat – not a regular lunch item – to avoid the partially hydrogenated fats and high calories that can affect heart health.
- Variety in the diet is important, not just to avoid rigid patterns and routines, but also to get a variety of vitamins and minerals. So change it up. Even if your child eats only two or three protein foods, you can alternate them.

- Aim for whole foods. Less packaged food means less artificial color, preservatives, sodium and other additives known to affect attention and behavior.
- Try snack foods similar to what your child already likes but in enriched or whole-grain varieties.
- Vegetables – eat more!! Carrot sticks, cucumber slices, salads... Try dips and dressings to encourage new eaters.
- Send lunches in an insulated bag with a cold pack. Bacteria can multiply to dangerous levels when food is left at room temperature for even a few hours.

According to the Federal *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, lunch should provide one-third of the key nutrients your child needs for the day. Lunch matters, so make smart choices and think about all of the food groups.

Check out www.MyPyramid.gov for personalized eating plans and interactive tools to help you plan your family's food choices.

Cynthia Birse is a Clinical Instructor and has been at The Birchtree Center since the beginning. She is interested in nutrition and fitness issues.



Strawberries by Aidan