

A Smart Start – A Safe Route Back to school preparation

In the previous issue of *HealthHints*, [Preparing for a New School Year](#), we discussed ways to prepare our kids physically for a healthy school year by getting the most out of an annual physical examination, learning strategies for illness prevention and injury reduction, and helping children get proper rest to function at their best.

In this issue of *HealthHints*, we'll continue preparing to go back to school with tips on:

- mental preparation (anxiety and stress),
- food preparation (cafeteria choices and packed lunches), and
- transportation preparation (walking, cycling, bussing, and/or driving).



Mental Preparation Efforts to reduce anxiety & stress

Your child's mental health is equally important to his physical health. In fact, "stress can alter the body's immune system...."¹ "Anxiety and stress about starting school is normal for a child and usually passes within the first few days or weeks."² "The beginning of a new school year can be a stressful time for children, with new teachers and classmates, bigger classrooms, new routines, and more schoolwork. This time can be particularly unnerving and overwhelming for children who are facing major transitions such as starting elementary school or entering middle school. As a parent, there are proactive steps you can take to support your child as he or she heads back to school."²

- Express interest and enthusiasm about the start of the school year. If you're confident and excited, your child will be, too.²
- Visit your child's school ahead of time. Walk around the school with your child and locate his or her classrooms, lunchroom, playground, library, science lab, gymnasium, and restrooms.^{2,3} This visit will help to keep your child from feeling lost on the first day.²

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- Take time to listen to your child and discuss aspects of the new school year that he or she is worried about. Remember to let your child know that it's normal to feel nervous about the start of school. For parents of younger children, suggest that your child take a family photo or special object to school to make his or her surroundings more comfortable.²
- Try to meet a classmate ahead of time, or introduce your child to someone in the area who will be riding the bus or who can walk or bicycle with him or her. Remind your child that he/she is not the only student who is a bit uneasy at first.⁴
- Help your child plan ahead and stay ahead from the start. If age appropriate, get your child a wall calendar or personal planner. Mark the dates for midterms, finals, and other tests, as well as projects, rehearsals, and practices. If your child starts to feel behind or is struggling in a subject,

encourage him/her to talk to the teacher. Addressing the problem right away can save time and reduce stress when the teacher has an opportunity to understand the child's struggles.³

- Spend time each day talking to your child about what happened in school. Give your child positive feedback about his or her new experiences.²
- Praise and encourage your child to become involved with school activities and try new things.²
- Attend school functions, and stay involved in your child's education. Children whose parents are more involved

with their education have higher achievement, are better adjusted, and are less likely to drop out of school.²

- Make a point to learn about how your child develops – not just physically, but socially and emotionally, as well. If you are aware of what is considered to be typical behavior and thoughts for your child's stage of life, you will be able to tell more readily when things may not be right.²

If your child seems to remain anxious or stressed, seek the support of your child's pediatrician, who can refer you to the appropriate services if needed.²

Food Preparation

Eating nutritiously & safely

In addition to maintaining good mental health, research continues to validate the importance of nutrition for the brain and body.

"...Skipping breakfast can affect children's intellectual performance, and even moderate



under-nutrition can have lasting effects on cognitive development;⁵ while "...overweight children are more likely to have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high insulin levels. They are also

Fun & Nutritious Lunch Ideas

- Core and stuff an apple with peanut butter; then slice it crosswise.



- Spread light cream cheese and jelly of any flavor on a tortilla and roll it up.
- Make mini kabobs on straws – ham and cheese, grapes and melon balls, cherry tomatoes and cheese cubes.
- Roll a slice of meat around string cheese or a carrot.
- Cookie-cut sandwiches into fun, interesting shapes.⁷

In addition to choosing nutritious foods, keeping the foods safe for eating can be a challenge when packing for school. Here are some tips that can help you and your child with "safe sacking":

- Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold to prevent growth

of bacteria that can cause foodborne illness.

- Send hot meals (soups) in an insulated thermos.
- Pack cold foods (salads) with ice packs in insulated lunch bags.
- For drinks, pack frozen juice boxes that will thaw by mealtime.
- Wrap sandwiches tightly; then put them in a sealed bag or container. Refrigerate sandwiches if made ahead (the night before, for example).
- Wash the top of beverage containers, or use a straw or cup.
- Clean plastic lunch boxes daily with soap and water. Only use paper or plastic bags once.
- Wash fresh fruits and vegetables before putting them in a lunch box or before eating them.
- Keep sandwiches in the refrigerator until leaving for school.

- Wash hands before preparing lunches and before eating.

- Use frozen juice boxes or freezer gels to keep lunches cool.

Keep in mind, certain foods are not safe at room temperature, such as:

- cooked or uncooked meats,
- cooked vegetables, and
- dairy products.

Try these "safe at room temperature" foods instead:

- fresh or dried fruit,
- fresh vegetables,
- breads, and
- cookies.⁷

Though you can't completely control what your children eat once they get to school, you can help them learn to make healthy choices and help keep their foods safe from foodborne illnesses.



more likely to become overweight adults, who are at increased risk for heart disease and diabetes.”⁵ For more trends and implications for healthy eating and the brain, see the excerpt *Eating for Health and Academic Achievement* as well as *Experts Offer Back-to-School Meal and Snacking Advice*.

The arguments for giving children good nutrition at the right time, in the right amounts, and of the right kind are numerous. One of the best ways to do that is to follow the guidelines in the Kids’ Food Guide Pyramid [MyPyramid Worksheet](#) and read the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). Schools have begun to offer better choices, such as salad bars in the cafeteria and vending machines with healthy



snacks, like pretzels. Help your child learn what is healthy, and make good choices while at school or when packing a lunch.

“Encourage your child to

choose cafeteria meals that include fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and whole grains, such as wheat bread instead of white. Also, avoid fried foods when possible, and choose milk or water as a drink.

If you’re helping your child pack a lunch, start by brainstorming foods and snacks that he or she would like to eat. In addition to old standbys, such as peanut butter and jelly, try pitas or wrap sandwiches stuffed with grilled chicken or veggies. Try soups and salads if your child is willing, and don’t forget last night’s leftovers as an easy lunchbox filler.”⁶ For more ideas, see [School Lunches](#) from the Nemours Foundation.⁶

Transportation Preparation Safety on the way to & from school

You’ve heard the saying “getting there is half the battle.” Well, that is true in the most literal sense when it comes to getting our kids to school. As parents, we rush through the morning trying to find one left shoe while packing a lunch and brushing teeth. The truth is, getting our children to school on time and safely can be a challenge. Slow down before the school year starts and talk as a family about getting to school safely, whatever mode of transportation you use. Here are some tips to review and start your discussion from the American Academy of Pediatrics:⁸

School Bus

- Wait for the bus to stop before approaching it from the curb.
- Do not move around on the bus.
- Check to see that no other traffic is coming before crossing.
- Make sure to always remain in clear view of the bus driver.⁸



Car

- All passengers should use a seat belt and/or an age- and size-appropriate car safety seat or booster seat.
- Your child should ride in a child safety seat with a harness as long as possible and then ride in a belt-positioning booster seat. Your child is ready for a booster seat when she has reached the top weight or height allowed for her seat, her shoulders are above the top harness slots, or her ears have reached the top of the seat.



- Your child should ride in a belt-positioning booster seat until the vehicle’s seat belt fits properly (usually when the child reaches about 4’ 9” in height and is between 8 to 12 years of age). This means the shoulder belt lies across the middle of the chest and shoulder, not the neck or throat; the lap belt is low and snug across the thighs, not the stomach; and the child is tall enough to sit against the vehicle seat back with her legs bent at the knees and feet hanging down.
- All children under 13 years of age should ride in the rear seat of vehicles.



Correct safety belt fit

- Remember that many crashes occur while novice teen drivers are going to and from school. You may want to limit the number of teen passengers to prevent driver distraction. Do not allow your teen to drive while eating, drinking, or talking on a cell phone.⁸

Bike

- Always wear a bicycle helmet, no matter how short or long the ride.
- Ride on the right, in the same direction as auto traffic.
- Use appropriate hand signals.



- Respect traffic lights and stop signs.
- Wear brightly colored clothing to increase visibility.
- Know the “rules of the road.”⁸

Walking to School

- Make sure your child’s walk to a school is a safe route with well-trained adult crossing guards at every intersection.
- Be realistic about your child’s pedestrian skills. Because small children are impulsive and less cautious around traffic, carefully consider whether or not your child is ready to walk to school without adult supervision.



For more transportation safety tips see *Passenger Safety, Transportation Safety Tips for Children* and *Staying Safe in the Car and on the Bus*.

Begin Your School Year Healthy Keep the school year healthy

Take time before school begins and occasionally throughout the year to talk with your children about health and safety. Let them take an active part in planning lunches and picking out safety gear. Starting your school year with a little preparation and giving occasional reminders throughout the year can go a long way toward your child’s health, safety, and well-being.

To view the references used in this newsletter, go to:
<http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/healthhints/2007sep/ref.php>

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The following is an excerpt from

Eating for Health and Academic Achievement

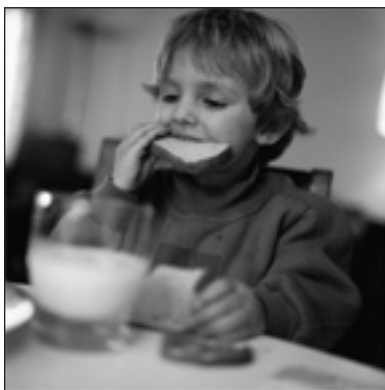
By Julie Allington, Nutrition Education Consultant, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
Article published in the Wisconsin School News, March 2001.

Promoting healthy behaviors among students is an important part of the fundamental mission of schools: to provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to become healthy and productive adults. Improving student health can increase students' capacity to learn, reduce absenteeism, and improve physical fitness and mental alertness.

The quality of children's diets is declining, while at the same time the emphasis on test scores and the concern about disciplinary problems in schools are increasing. Can the quality of children's food intake affect their academic performance? Can it affect student behavior? Can commercialism in the school be detrimental to healthy eating? Would schools be prudent in creating a school environment that promotes healthy eating among students and staff?

Trends and Implications

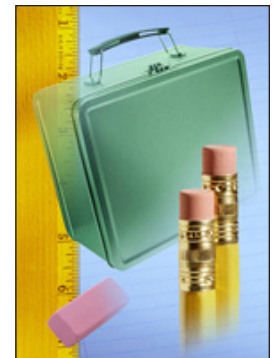
Breakfast and Academic Achievement. Many students start school with no breakfast or an inadequate breakfast. Qualitative surveys on breakfast consumption completed by Wisconsin students showed that approximately 10 percent of students at the elementary level, 25 percent in middle school, and 30 percent of high school students



started school without breakfast.¹ Many other students come to school with an inadequate breakfast. Studies show that omitting breakfast interferes with cognition and learning, an effect that is more pronounced in nutritionally at-risk children. A landmark study examined the effects of school

breakfast on academic performance among 1,023 low-income third through fifth grade students. Results showed that children who participated in the study had significantly greater gains in overall standardized test scores and showed improvements in math, reading, and vocabulary scores. In addition, rates of absence and tardiness were reduced among participants.²

Hunger and Behavioral Problems. An estimated four million American children experience prolonged periodic food insufficiency and hunger each year, representing 8 percent of the children under the age of 12 in this country.



The Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP) study examined the relationship between hunger and psychosocial functions among low-income, school-aged children. Analysis showed that virtually all behavioral, emotional, and academic problems were more prevalent in hungry children. Aggression and anxiety had the strongest degree of association with hunger.³

The three-year Universal School Breakfast Program pilot study in six Minnesota elementary schools showed a general increase in composite math and reading scores, improved student behavior, reduced morning trips to the nurse, and increased student attendance and test scores.⁴

Obesity and Health Risks and Low Self-Esteem. Childhood obesity is recognized as a national epidemic. The prevalence of overweight among young people ages 6–17 years in the United States has more than doubled in the past 20 years,⁵ and that

trend is continuing. Over 4.7 million, or 11 percent of youths ages 6–17 years are seriously overweight.⁶

As many as 30,000 children have type 2 diabetes, a type of diabetes that was once almost entirely limited to adults.⁷

It is well-known that overweight in adults increases the risk for cardiovascular disease and premature death. A recent study in *Pediatrics* reported that more than one fourth of children, ages 5–10, had one or more adverse cardiovascular disease risk factors. That number rose to nearly 61 percent among overweight children of the same age. Twenty-seven percent of overweight children had two or more risk factors.⁸

The total costs of diseases associated with obesity have been estimated at almost \$100 billion per year, or approximately 8 percent of the national health care budget.⁹

Calcium Intake and Osteoporosis and Health Care Costs. Only 30 percent of school children consume the recommended milk group servings on any given day,¹⁰ and only 19 percent of girls ages 9–19 meet the recommended intakes of calcium.^{11, 12} Between 1989–91 and 1994–95, among children aged 2–17, the average consumption of milk and milk products dropped by 6.2 percent while the average consumption of soft drinks rose by 41 percent.

Osteoporosis is a growing concern. With almost half of an adult's bone mass being formed during the teen years,¹³ the inadequate calcium intakes among children and adolescents is a serious trend. The focus of concern for children has been highlighted by a 1999

statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Nutrition: "it is reasonable to conclude that low calcium intakes may be an important risk factor for fractures in adolescents."¹⁴



Nutrient Intake and Health Risks. Only 2 percent of children meet the recommendations of the Food Guide Pyramid. Less than 15 percent of school children eat the recommended servings of fruit.

Physical Activity and Health Risks and Low Self-Esteem. Nearly half of young people ages 12–21 do not engage in physical activity on regular basis. Physical activity among adolescents is consistently related to higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety and stress.

You can find the complete document, *Eating for Health and Academic Achievement* (with references), at: <http://dpi.wi.gov/fscp/doc/tnarticle.doc>.

