**Parents Help Children Learn Life-Long Nutrition Habits**

Children build lifelong habits at a very young age. If you’re a parent, know that your everyday behavior plays a big part in shaping your child’s behavior. With your help, kids can learn to develop healthy eating habits that last throughout their lives.

The start of the new school year is a great time to make changes in our daily routines that will help encourage our kids to eat healthier. Though there are other things that influence a child’s behavior, know that the choices they see you make when it comes to food and portion size makes a big difference. Be your child’s role model for nutrition!

From their first day in kindergarten through the last day of their senior year, children need nutritious lunches with fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy products to maintain good eating habits that will last for life and even improve their attention span and academic performance.

Here are a few tips to help you develop healthier meals for your child’s lunch box:

A child’s lunch should be fun, easy to prepare and easy to eat within their lunch break, which is usually 20 minutes or less. Sandwiches are popular items, but be aware that a whole sandwich is usually too much food for most boys under eight years old and girls under 11 years old.

Other good lunch choices include: raw vegetable pieces (e.g. baby carrots, cherry tomatoes, sliced cucumbers, celery, red or green bell peppers); crackers; cheese slices or cubes; string cheese; whole fruit; individual containers of pudding, and yogurt.

Prepackaged lunches are convenient, but they are more expensive and often higher in fat, sugar and calories than meals you prepare yourself. Pack your own portion-controlled meals that are cheaper, healthier, fresher, and tastier.

Some healthy, kid-friendly lunch ideas that are interesting and appealing include:

* Low-fat cheese slices, whole wheat crackers, Kiwi & baby carrots
* Bean & Cheese Burrito with salsa, pear slices, animal crackers
* English muffin pizza, ¼ cup dried fruit, small green salad, graham cracker
* Mini pita rounds with hummus, baby tomatoes, canned pineapple (in its own juice)
* Turkey wrap with lettuce, strawberries, broccoli with low-fat ranch dressing
* ½ Ham sandwich with lettuce, cantaloupe slices, celery sticks

Beverages choices are also extremely important. Milk is the most nutritious beverage for all children. Any kind of milk provides calcium and vitamin D, which are important for growth of bones and teeth. Just remember that chocolate or other flavored milk is likely to have more sugar. Consider offering low-fat or skim milk, which have the same nutritional value as whole milk but less fat.

Fruit juice can be substituted for milk occasionally. Always serve 100% juice rather than a less expensive, high-sugar fruit drink. A soft drink is not a good choice, because it contains a lot of calories but no nutrients.

Cooperative Extension’s Family & Consumer Science department is available to help you learn how to prepare healthy meals that meet recommendations included in the National Dietary Guidelines for Americans. For more information, contact the Pasquotank Cooperative Extension Center at 252-338-3954. Visit Pasquotank Cooperative Extension on the web: <https://pasquotank.ces.ncsu.edu>, Like us on Facebook: NC Cooperative Extension-Pasquotank County Center or follow us on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/PasquotankCES>.