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At snack time, think 'outside the bag'

By Jennifer Wolcott | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Asked to name their favorite snack, kids will likely say candy, chips, or cookies. But as parents become more savvy about snack time and nutrition, that's starting to change.

Whether spurred by reports of America's child obesity problem or just looking for alternatives to sweets, parents are finding creative ways to serve nutritious snacks that kids will actually eat.

"For every favorite snack food, there's often a healthier alternative," says Janice Newell Bissex, coauthor of "The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers: Improving the Way Your Family Eats, One Meal at a Time!"

Instead of a sugar-added "fruit rollup," try some "fruit leather," made of dried fruit. Instead of ice cream, serve a smoothie made with fresh or frozen fruit. A tasty smoothie can include bananas blended with strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, juice, milk, yogurt, and ice.

Another popular alternative to junk food is trail mix. To make it, Ms. Newell Bissex suggests some combination of raisins, dried fruit, almonds, cashews, peanuts, Wheat Chex cereal, Cheerios, sunflower seeds, and M&M's or chocolate chips (in moderation). Mix what you want in a bowl, then divide it up into sandwich bags for an on-the-go snack.

Children also are more likely to eat something when it's presented in an appealing, playful way, says Newell Bissex.

"If you give children 'healthy' food, they won't eat it. But present it with a sense of fun and whimsy, and they'll ask for it again and again," she says.

Those "ants on a log" (peanut butter and raisins layered onto celery sticks) are still a hit. Or parents can create fun shapes with cheese using cookie cutters, then serve them with wheat crackers.

An open-faced peanut-butter sandwich may be more appetizing when M&M's or raisins are used to form a smiley face. And don't forget the appeal of dipping - baby carrots with ranch dressing and sliced apples with peanut butter are a hit with kids.

Nea Hoyt, a mother of three children from Charlestown, Mass., has become more diligent about feeding her kids healthful snacks.

She suggests leaving the kids at home when grocery shopping to avoid battles over all the tempting junk food on display everywhere.

She's also found that introducing children to a variety of good foods early on helps them acquire a taste for them. Then they are more likely to make the right choices on their own.

So far, her two oldest children seem to be on the right track. Mather, age 9, says he would choose an apple over a cookie. Josie, her 7-year-old, is crazy about kiwis and other fruits.

Still, Ms. Hoyt says, "I'm not perfect. I give my children M&M's and Gummi Bears once in a while.... But most days, I try to be more creative and prepare snacks that are better for them."

Harry, her youngest, is the resident cookie monster and detester of anything green. "But he might change his mind," says Hoyt's daughter, Josie. "I didn't like salad at his age either."

Which brings up another point: If children don't like a certain food the first, second, or even third time, keep trying.

"It might take as many as 14 or 15 times before they decide they like a certain food," says Julia Grimaldi, a nutritionist who works in the Boston public school system. "Keep encouraging the good stuff."

Teaching kids how to make their own snacks is another way to kick the junk-food habit, says Katie Wilton, a cooking teacher in Brookline, Mass.

They could try making their own versions of their favorite snacks - such as pita chips from fresh pita bread or baked French fries rather than the deep-fried ones, Ms. Grimaldi says.

Just one hour in the kitchen over the weekend may reap big rewards, says Ms. Wilton. Not only could parents and children prepare snacks for the week ahead (trail mix or fruit muffins, for instance), but kids also will feel proud of their accomplishments and then be more likely to gobble up their finished products instead of junk food.

"Snacks don't require as many steps to prepare as a whole meal, so the process is less overwhelming for kids," says Wilton, who just completed her first cookbook, "You're the Cook: A Guide to Mixing it Up in the Kitchen," geared for ages 9 and up.

A little parent-child bonding might also result from sharing time at the stove, says Wilton.

But if there's no time to cook, parents could "organize a taste test," suggests Newell Bissex. She says parents could ask children to taste three kinds of granola bars and rate them.

She ascribes to a common-sense approach of moderation - not deprivation. Once in a while, a little sugar is OK. Her recipe for chocolate-chip banana muffins includes not just fresh fruit and whole-wheat flour, but also some sugar and chocolate, of course.

(To see her recipe, go to www.mealmakeovermoms.com.)

Mini pizzas

2 whole wheat English muffins
4 tablespoons marinara sauce
pepperoni slices (optional)
4 ounces shredded low-fat mozzarella cheese

Split English muffins in half and lightly toast. Spread a tablespoon or so of marinara sauce on each half, add pepperoni (optional), and sprinkle with mozzarella. Put mini pizzas on toaster oven's metal tray and bake at 350 degrees F. for 5 to 7 minutes, until cheese is melted. Or hit the "toast" button again: That will melt the cheese, though it may not warm the sauce through. Serves 2 to 4, depending on the kids' appetites.

Berry-yogurt smoothie

2 ripe bananas, broken into chunks
2 cups frozen strawberries, raspberries, or blueberries (or combination equaling 2 cups)
6 ounces low-fat strawberry yogurt
6 ounces low-fat vanilla, banana, or peach yogurt
1 cup skim milk
3/4 cup orange juice
1 teaspoon vanilla
cinnamon, to taste

Place all fruit into blender. Add yogurt, milk, juice, and vanilla. Sprinkle with cinnamon. Blend until smooth, and pour into glasses. Serves 3 to 4.

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