



Ensuring your kids eat good stuff at school

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— One question often rests in the back of parents' minds as their kids scurry around getting ready for school: "Do I pack their lunches or give them cafeteria money?" With more pre-packaged lunch options available, parents may wonder whether a more nutritious choice may be found at the grocery store or in the cafeteria.

"The advantage of bringing a lunch from home is that it can be a little more individualized," said Keith Ayoob, an American Dietetic Association spokesman and registered dietician. "But school lunch offers milk, and most kids fall very short of their calcium requirement."

Under the 1946 National School Lunch Act the federal government provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 27 million children each day.

"Participating in the school feeding program leads to improved education outcomes," said Susan Acker, a spokeswoman for the Food and Nutrition Service, the federal agency administering the school lunch program. "The federal assistance program uses the abundance of American agriculture to promote the nutrition and health of our nation's school children."

In exchange for receiving federal funding and food, public and nonprofit private school cafeterias must meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The guidelines specify no more than 30 percent of an individual's calories may come from fat and less than 10 percent from saturated fat.

The regulations also mandate that school lunches provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowance of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium and calories.

"It's cost-saving for parents," Ayoob said. "It's economical to get one-third of your RDA in one meal. Also, kids have the added advantage that they'll eat what everyone else is eating."

Acker said the federal government leaves specific menus to local cafeterias because the cafeterias work most closely with students and can more easily identify student likes and dislikes.

"(The local authorities) are the folks on the front line," Acker said. "They are the ones that are there in the schools. But we work with local agencies and school authorities to make healthy food choices (for children). They're not operating alone; the responsibilities are shared."

Acker said the FNS provides training and assistance to support local cafeterias' lunch programs.

Also, children can choose what to eat in the cafeteria. Only students who eat free or reduced price lunches must accept certain items on the serving line.

"Even if they don't eat the food, exposure to it increases the chances that they might eat it," Ayoob said. "We still are obligated to present a nutritiously balanced meal to kids. Research shows if you present kids with a variety of healthy, nutritious foods, it becomes their responsibility to decide what and how much of the offerings to have."

Nutritionists differ in their preference on the healthier meal choice - cafeteria food or a brown-bag lunch.

Nancy Brenowitz, registered dietician and nutrition counselor and consultant, said she would recommend children bringing their lunch to school.

"You can eat a healthy lunch at school, but most kids don't," she said. "Packing a lunch is much more nutritious, and (parents) have a lot more control over what they eat." Even though studies show the quality of cafeteria food has improved, she said, the lunches used to be high in fat and calories.

And Brenowitz cites the presence of competitive foods, including vending machines and fast food chains, as a problem in cafeteria-fed students.

However, Katherine Tallmadge, registered dietician and American Dietetic Association spokeswoman, said she would recommend having your child eat lunch in the school cafeteria. "Elementary school lunches are pretty good," she said. "They are in accordance with the USDA, and they have nicely balanced meals."

Tallmadge said she suggests allowing children to have some input in their meal choices. "It is harder for kids to make a healthy decision," she said. "Bring your child into the decision-making process on what they eat."