A healthy start

Many things may have changed in your youngster’s world this year, but here’s one that remains the same: She needs a balanced diet to stay healthy. Here are answers to questions you might have as the new school year gets in full swing.

Q: My daughter says she’s not hungry for breakfast when she wakes up. What can I do?
A: A complete breakfast gives your child energy and helps her focus in school. Have her do the rest of her morning routine before she eats, or let her eat in school if that’s an option. Also, she may be more interested if she gets to eat something other than breakfast foods. You could heat up last night’s leftovers, or microwave a baked potato and let her pick the toppings.

Q: My child wants to snack all day when she’s home. How can I encourage good habits?
A: Your daughter may not be eating enough at meals if she’s hungry soon afterward. Discourage snacking 1–2 hours before each meal so she comes to the table with a healthy appetite. When she does snack, suggest healthy options like snap peas or pumpkin seeds.

Q: We’ve been eating at home a lot more lately. Any tips for making family meals more interesting?
A: Ask your youngster to think of fun themes, such as Macaroni Monday or Souper Saturday. Or if you normally like going out for Thai or Mexican food, look up recipes for your favorite dishes and make them together. When the weather is nice, you might find a nice spot and eat outdoors.

Gym-in-a-box

Encourage your child to get more physical activity with a portable “gym.” Let him fill a big box or bin with fun equipment, then find creative ways to use it. Share these ideas to get him started.

● **Bubble wrap.** See how fast you can pop all the bubbles with your feet.

● **Twister mat.** Starting with each hand or foot on separate circles, do cartwheels or crab walks (walking on all fours—but upside down).

● **Hula-hoop.** Lay the hoop on the floor, and jump in and out of it 10 times.

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Creative cooking for kids

Want to boost the odds that your child will eat healthy foods? Do kid-friendly activities like these.

Play with shapes. Let your youngster use cookie cutters to make shapes from food. He might be more apt to eat spinach and mushroom quesadillas if they’re shaped like dinosaurs. Or maybe he’ll try cucumber and cream cheese sandwiches if he gets to cut them into star shapes.

Add color. Does your child hesitate over whole grains? Try this. Ask him to squish raspberries or blueberries in a colander and strain the juice into a bowl. Now let him stir the berry pieces, along with some whole berries, into batter for whole-grain pancakes or muffins. Be sure to save the “dye” so he can use a pastry brush to paint his cooked treat with the fruit juice!

Make pictures. Suggest that your youngster create a masterpiece on his plate. Offer a few healthy foods—including some he enjoys and others he’s not as keen on. He might make low-fat cottage cheese “clouds” and a pineapple “sun” shining down on a field of “flowers” with green bean “stems” and strawberry “petals.”

Smart swaps

During the spring and summer, we took fewer trips to the grocery store, which meant we didn’t always have the ingredients we needed. The good news is, I learned to swap in different ingredients, and sharing my discoveries with my son Blake has helped him be more flexible about what he eats.

I asked Blake to make a chart labeled “Don’t have that? Use this!” For example, when we ran out of butter to bake oatmeal raisin cookies, I used an equal amount of mashed overripe bananas instead. When we didn’t have pasta or ground beef, I made couscous, stirred in pasta sauce, and heated up frozen turkey meatballs to put on top.

Each time we substitute an ingredient, Blake adds it to the chart so we remember for next time. We often discover that foods taste just as good—and sometimes even better—with a creative swap.

Our purpose

To provide busy parents with practical ways to promote healthy nutrition and physical activity for their children.

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Nutrition Nuggets™ is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.

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