

# HEALTHY CELEBRATIONS



## *Promoting a Healthy School Environment*

Birthday parties and holiday celebrations at school provide a unique opportunity to make healthy eating fun and exciting for children. Schools can take advantage of classroom celebrations to serve nutritious foods that taste good and provide students with an opportunity to learn about healthy eating.

### **But It's Just a Cupcake...**

Foods for school celebrations often include unhealthy choices such as cupcakes, candy, cookies and soda. While there is nothing wrong with an occasional treat, unhealthy foods are often the norm rather than the exception. Parties, food rewards, food fundraisers, vending machines, snacks and school stores often include foods that are low in nutrients and high in fat, added sugars and sodium.

Healthy choices are important because children's eating habits are poor. Children ages 2 to 18 consume almost 40 percent of their calories from solid fats and added sugars.<sup>1</sup> Their diets do not include enough fruits, vegetables (particularly dark green and orange vegetables and legumes), whole grains or calcium-rich foods, and are too high in sodium, saturated fat and added sugars.<sup>2</sup> Currently, 17 percent of children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 are overweight and 1 in 3 children are overweight or obese.<sup>3</sup> Between 1980 and 2004, obesity tripled among children and adolescents.<sup>4</sup>



Constant exposure to low-nutrient foods compromises children's health and learning. By providing students with nutritious foods, schools can create an environment that positively influences children's health and learning, and teaches healthy lifestyle choices that will continue into adulthood.

### **Benefits of Healthy Celebrations**

- ▶ **Healthy Kids Learn Better:** Research clearly demonstrates that good nutrition is linked to better behavior and academic performance. To provide the best possible learning environment for children, schools must also provide an environment that supports healthy behaviors.
- ▶ **Provides Consistent Messages:** Providing healthy classroom celebrations demonstrates a school commitment to promoting healthy behaviors. It supports the classroom lessons students are learning about health, instead of contradicting them. Healthy celebrations promote positive lifestyle choices to reduce student health risks and improve learning.
- ▶ **Promotes a Healthy School Environment:** To improve eating behaviors, students need to receive consistent, reliable health information and ample opportunity to use it. Healthy celebrations are an important part of providing a healthy school environment.
- ▶ **Creates Excitement About Nutrition:** Children are excited about new and different things, including fun party activities and healthy snacks. School staff and parents need not worry that children will be disappointed if typical party foods aren't served in the classroom. Holiday treats and traditional birthday parties with cake can still be available at home.
- ▶ **Protects Children with Food Allergies:** When parents send in food, it is difficult to ensure the safety of children with food allergies. Schools can protect food-allergic children by providing nonfood celebrations or, if food is served, obtaining it from known sources such as the school food service program.

### **How-To's for Happy Healthy Parties\***

- Variety is the "spice of life" and the "life of the party." Plan several contrasting activities – active and quiet, indoor and outdoor, individual and group.
- Try something new. Children like adventure. In addition to familiar games and foods, offer something different.
- Plan creative experiences such as art, music and cooking.
- Involve children in planning and preparing the party. Let them make decorations and favors.
- Put food in its proper place. Refreshments should complement the fun, not become the "main event."
- Be sure that each child receives a prize or favor, if such awards are given.
- Don't use food as rewards or prizes.
- Choose foods for fun, good taste and health. Parties that feature healthful foods provide opportunities for children to practice making wise food choices.

\* Printed with permission from *Let's Party: Party Ideas for School and Home*. West Virginia Department of Education, 1994.

# IDEAS FOR HEALTHY CELEBRATIONS

Schools can help promote a positive learning environment by providing healthy celebrations that shift the focus from food to the children. Choose a variety of activities, games and crafts that children enjoy. When food is served, make it count with healthy choices. Parties can even incorporate a fun nutrition lesson by involving children in the planning and preparation of healthy snacks. Try these ideas for fun activities and healthy foods at school parties and other celebrations.

## Activities to Celebrate Children

- ▶ Plan special party games and activities. Ask parents to provide game supplies, pencils, erasers, stickers and other small school supplies instead of food.
- ▶ Create a healthy party idea book. Ask school staff and parents to send in healthy recipes and ideas for activities, games and crafts. Compile these ideas into a book that staff and parents can use.
- ▶ Give children extra recess time instead of a class party. For birthdays, let the birthday child choose and lead an active game for everyone.
- ▶ Provide special time with the principal or another adult, such as taking a walk around the school at recess.
- ▶ Instead of food, ask parents to purchase a book for the classroom or school library in the birthday child's name. Read it to the class or invite the child's parents to come in and read it to the class.
- ▶ Instead of a party, organize a special community service project, e.g., invite senior citizens in for lunch, make "curechiefs" for chemotherapy patients or blankets for rescue dogs. Involve parents in planning the project and providing needed materials.
- ▶ Create a "Celebrate Me" book. Have classmates write stories or poems and draw pictures to describe what is special about the birthday child.
- ▶ Create a special birthday event. The birthday child wears a sash and crown, sits in a special chair and visits the principal's office for a special birthday surprise, such as a pencil, sticker or birthday card.
- ▶ The birthday child is the teacher's assistant for the day, and gets to do special tasks like make deliveries to office, lead the line, start an activity or choose a game or story.



## Healthy Food Ideas\*

- Low-fat or nonfat milk, 100% juice, water, flavored/sparkling water (without added sugars or sweeteners), sparkling punch (seltzer and 100% fruit juice)
- Fruit smoothies (blend frozen berries, bananas and pineapple) or fruit and low-fat yogurt smoothies
- Fresh fruit assortment, fruit and cheese kabobs, fruit salad, sliced fruit with low-fat yogurt dip
- Dried fruit without added sugars or sweeteners
- Vegetable trays with low-fat dip, celery and carrots with peanut butter and raisins
- Whole-grain crackers with low-fat cheese cubes, string cheese or hummus
- Whole-grain waffles or pancakes topped with fruit
- Pretzels, low-fat popcorn, rice cakes, bread sticks, graham crackers and animal crackers
- Angel food cake, plain or topped with fruit
- Whole-grain bagel slices with peanut butter or jam, low-fat whole-grain muffin, whole-wheat English muffins and hot pretzels
- Pizza with low-fat toppings (vegetables, lean ham, Canadian bacon), pizza dippers with marinara sauce
- Ham or turkey sandwiches or wraps with low-fat cheese and low-fat, low-sodium condiments
- Low-fat pudding, low-fat yogurt, squeezable yogurt, yogurt smoothies, yogurt parfaits or banana splits (low-fat yogurt and fruit topped with whole-grain cereal, granola or crushed graham crackers)
- Quesadillas or bean burritos with salsa
- Low-fat whole-grain granola bars
- Low-fat whole-grain tortilla chips with salsa or bean dip
- Trail or cereal mix (whole-grain, low-sugar cereals mixed with dried fruit and pretzels)
- Nuts and seeds without added fat

\*Check for food allergies before serving.

## Resources

*Action Guide for School Nutrition and Physical Activity Policies.* Connecticut State Department of Education, Revised 2009. <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2678&q=322436>  
*Healthy School Environment Resource List.* Connecticut State Department of Education. [http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Nutrition/hse\\_resource\\_list.pdf](http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Nutrition/hse_resource_list.pdf)

## References

- 1 Reedy, J., & Krebs-Smith, S.M. (2010). Dietary Sources of Energy, Solid Fats, and Added Sugars among Children and Adolescents in the United States. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 110(10):1477-1484
- 2 U.S. Department of Agriculture Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. (2009). The quality of children's diets in 2003-04 as measured by the Healthy Eating Index – 2005. *Nutrition Insights*, 43. Retrieved on October 6, 2011 from <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/NutritionInsights/Insight43.pdf>.
- 3 Ogden, C.L., Carroll, M.D., Curtin, L.R., Lamb, M.M., & Flegal, K.M. (2010). Prevalence of high body mass index in US children and adolescents, 2007-2008. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 303(3):242-249.
- 4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. (2006). *Prevalence of Overweight Among Children and Adolescents: United States, 2003-2004*. Retrieved on October 6, 2011 from [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/overweight/overweight\\_child\\_03.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/overweight/overweight_child_03.htm).



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