

Linking Health and Learning: Healthy Eating At School and Over the Holidays

By Gabrielle Ratte Smith, Prevention and Wellness Coordinator at Chittenden Central Supervisory Union

Schools play an important role in teaching students about healthy eating and providing nutritious foods and reasonable portions. Good nutrition is recognized as key factor in school readiness and success. Our schools embrace this connection, as you can see in the first lines of the district Wellness Policy, “Chittenden Central Supervisory Union believes that in order for children to achieve their full academic potential, healthy eating patterns are essential. A well-planned and well-implemented school nutrition program positively influences students’ eating habits.” (You can find the full wellness policy online at www.ccsuvt.org)

Our lunch menus show the importance our schools’ place on providing healthy and nutritious lunch and snack foods for students (information available on-line at www.ccsuvt.org). It is not the same lunch menu I remember as a student in the 70’s and early 80’s! Now, we see whole grains, fresh fruits, salad, low-fat dairy products, lean meats, and 100% fruit juices. If you look closely, you’ll see that whenever there is a day off for students (and a blank space where the lunch menu would have been), the staff puts together healthy eating tips and information!

Students have health classes and health-related presentations and lessons that teach them about nutrition and good eating habits. There are also many other opportunities in and out of the classroom for our children to learn about healthy eating:

- In the younger grades, lunch staff portion out the food to children, so they see what an appropriate serving size is.
- At Summit, Hiawatha, and Fleming Elementary Schools, students had a presentation this fall from Hannaford’s Food Play, which uses theater, juggling, music, and magic to teach the kids about nutrition and fitness. Students learned about making good eating and exercise choices, like trying new fruits and vegetables, along with incorporating daily physical activity.
- At ADL, students learn about many aspects of healthy eating in Family and Consumer Science class such as nutrition, diet analysis, reading food labels, and safe food preparation.
- At Essex High School, students apply what they know about healthy eating to choose from a variety of hot meals, a salad bar, and even a selection of nutritious foods prepared by the students at the Center for Technology and Education (CTE).

Every day, children and adults alike are faced with choices about what, when, and how much to eat. Moderation is important in all aspects of a healthy diet, and often one of the most difficult to do. In our age of “supersized” fast food meals and larger portions in many restaurants and take-home meals, the average portion size has risen steadily. Many of us tend to overestimate the recommended serving size and may be eating larger

portions than we think. The National Institutes of Health have created a “Portion Distortion” interactive online quiz. Go to <http://hp2010.nhlbihin.net/portion/index.htm> to check it out!

The holidays are right around the corner, and the holiday eating season has already begun. Moderation is especially important to remember over the holidays. Our kids will be out of school and their usual meal routine. Cookies, parties, and work gatherings all take us out of our normal eating patterns, too. While students are out of school these next two weeks, they will have lots of choices about how and what to eat over the break.

As a final thought, here are some tips from the experts at the federal Department of Health and Human Services on how you and your family can make healthy choices while celebrating the season!

- Overcome the urge to overeat. If your children are going with you to a party or gathering, give them a light, healthy snack high in protein shortly before you leave. They won't be starving and will be less likely to overeat. Make sure to watch portion sizes and select a few of your favorites from the host of tempting foods.
- Leave those extra calories behind — limit your intake of foods high in fat or added sugar.
- It's important not to let kids eat whatever they want during this festive time of year. In particular, limit the number of sodas your children drink.
- At the same time, be sure that you and your family members are getting enough of the nutritional foods your bodies need. Snacks and desserts are fine, but they're not meals. See that everyone keeps his or her nutritional balance with servings that include fruits and vegetables.
- Keep mealtime as regular as possible during the winter break. It's easy to lose track of the time when enjoying the vacation and let the kids get overly hungry (which can lead to overeating) or snack through most of the day until dinner.
- If weight control is an issue for anyone in your family, remember that exercise is a great way to spend time together and burn off those holiday calories! Take a walk with your kids and check out the decorations in your neighborhood.