

## Linking Health to Learning: Healthy Eating Helps Kids Learn

Ensuring our children are eating a healthy diet can be challenging, especially when we find ourselves rushing to get through all that needs to be done: job, school, housework, running kids to practices, lessons, and all of the other responsibilities that fill our days. Next month is National Nutrition Month®. This is a great opportunity to think about and discover options for increasing the nutritious foods in our families' diets. National Nutrition Month® is a nutrition education and information campaign created by the American Dietetic Association. The campaign is designed to focus attention on the importance of making informed food choices and developing sound eating and physical activity habits (for more information, go to [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)).

What is a "healthy diet"? The USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans describe a healthy diet as one that:

- Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products;
- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts; and
- Is low in saturated fats, trans-fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

Most of us are already aware of what it means to eat a healthy diet. The challenge for many families is finding creative solutions to our busy schedules that make it difficult to prepare healthy meals and snacks for children and teens. Even harder can be finding healthy "fast food" for those busiest days when eating at the family table is not an option.

There are many helpful websites that give quick and easy ideas for providing nutritious choices for children, both at home and when eating out. A simple online search using "healthy eating for families" yields literally millions of hits, so use caution and be sure to find out who is sponsoring the site. Here are a few sites that I found informative and easy to use: The Vermont Department of Health at [www.healthvermont.gov/family/index.aspx](http://www.healthvermont.gov/family/index.aspx) the University of Vermont Extension (look for past newsletter articles with helpful tips and information) at [www.uvm.edu/extension](http://www.uvm.edu/extension); and the American Heart Association at [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org).

Parents and educators are also aware of the connection between a healthy diet and children's ability to do their best learning. Much research has been done about the importance of student nutrition and academic achievement. The USDA Food and Nutrition Service funds several Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) that try to ensure that all students have access to healthy food during the school day. These programs include the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. Team Nutrition is another USDA program which offers free resources to families. Go to [www.fns.usda.gov/tn](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn) for more information, including *Team Up at Home: Team Nutrition Activity Book*, which is filled with lots of fun activities and useful tips.

As always, our local schools are paying close attention to what is served to our children while they are at school. Providing students with all the elements of a healthy diet that is appealing to kids is the mission of Chittenden Central Supervisory Union (CCSU) Food Service. Says Robert Clifford, CCSU Food Service Director: "In Essex we are attempting to reverse the national trends of Child Nutrition Programs toward highly processed frozen food stuffs. For decades CNP have been forced to limit labor and fresh offerings due to under-funding or no funding at the expense of childhood nutrition. Fresh local foods prepared from scratch will always yield a more nutritionally sound product. Please join in supporting the initiatives of the CCSU Food Service".

**Comment [grs1]:** Linda – I'm inclined to delete the last sentence from his quote. What do you think?

There is also classroom instruction for our students to teach them about nutrition. A great example is at ADL Middle School, where students in Family and Consumer Science teacher Terry Potvin's 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes created a Nutrition Nibbles newsletter, with the assistance of Melanie Cote, library media specialist and Hector Tamayo, Technology Education teacher. In addition to using multiple sources for information on nutrition to write their articles, students also learned proper citation methods and newspaper formatting. To read these informative newsletters, go to the ADL website at <http://www.ccsuvt.org/adl/documents/2.doc>.

Mrs. Potvin is also working with Art teacher Tina Logan and students in 6<sup>th</sup> grade on a Food as Art unit. The students just completed beautiful food-themed murals and mobiles while learning about healthy foods. The mobiles are already on display in the ADL lunchroom, and soon the murals will hang from the newly painted walls to help create a more beautiful space – by kids for kids!

There are many resources for students and their families to learn creative solutions to the challenges of providing nutritious meals and finding time to eat together a few times a week as a family. Eating a balanced, healthy diet will help our kids be the best learners they can be!