

Breakfast is Best - The Right Start

By Christine Beaudry

Want to help your kids increase their abilities to learn? Get them in the habit of eating a nutritious breakfast each morning and they'll be on their way to a better school day!

Parents want to give their kids every advantage when it comes to boosting their education, yet many families are overlooking a simple, surefire way to help their children be better students—breakfast! See that your child gets a good breakfast each morning before heading off to school, and you'll be giving him an essential start to his day.

The Right Start

The saying is true: breakfast really is the most important meal of the day. Kids who skip their morning meal suffer, according to the 1997 State of Minnesota Breakfast Study which documented the effects of a breakfast pilot program in six Minnesota schools for a three-year span. The study, implemented by the Minnesota Legislature, showed that students who ate breakfast before school had a general increase in math grades and reading scores, better attention spans, improved attendance, reduced nurse visits, and improved behavior. During testing, the Minnesota schools experienced a 40 to 50 percent decline in disciplinary actions.

Soon after, a 1998 study by Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School confirmed these benefits, showing that children who eat nutritious breakfasts fare better academically, show improved behavior, and are healthier than their peers who skip morning meals.

The reason for much of these results is that breakfast jump starts brains and bodies. Overnight, people use up the body's available glucose, and by morning the body is essentially fasting. Breakfast replenishes this glucose and provides children and adults fuel they need to maintain their energy throughout the morning. Kids who consistently skip breakfast may also be falling short as they're missing one-fourth to one-third of the day's energy and dietary needs.

Still not convinced? According to the American Dietetic Association, children that eat a good breakfast have lower blood cholesterol levels and control their weight—both health problems becoming alarmingly common in American children. Even if your child is at a normal weight, breakfast is a healthy habit to start at a young age and carry into adulthood.

Breakfast Made Easy

Getting a houseful of people ready for a busy day can be a challenge—but don't let breakfast become a casualty of your hectic morning schedule. Just a few time-saving preparations can help you start the day off right.

- Prepare the night before. Laying out clothes, checking backpacks and even packing lunches and setting the breakfast table ahead of time gives you a less frenzied start to your day.
- Get up 15 minutes earlier in the morning—you'll be surprised how much more relaxed you'll be with extra minutes and can enjoy breakfast time with your family.
- Leave the television off and you'll minimize what is often a major distraction.
- Have breakfast alternatives at the ready. If you normally make up a batch of pancakes on Saturday mornings, try making double or triple the recipe and freezing the leftovers for quick breakfasts during the week. If you plan breakfast foods into your weekly menus before shopping, you won't worry about running out of something in the morning.

What's on Your Child's Plate?

The American Dietetic Association emphasizes not only the importance of breakfast but the quality of foods children consume. Parents should carefully select healthy foods from the barrage of convenient yet highly sweetened breakfast fare such as pastries and high sugar cereals. "When a breakfast consists mostly of sugary foods, such as fruit, fruit juice, candy or pop, a quick rise in blood sugar occurs, causing a rush of energy," says the ADA. "After about an hour, blood sugar and energy decline, bringing on symptoms of hunger."

Check lists of ingredients—particularly looking for less sugar and fat. A balanced breakfast, consisting of carbohydrate, protein, healthy fats and optimally fiber (try for two or three grams a serving) gives a more constant release of energy, delaying hunger symptoms. Whole grain cereals and breads help fit the bill.

But what if cereal doesn't appeal to your kids? Jan Hangen, Clinical Nutrition Specialist at Children's Hospital Boston and at private practice in Brookline, Massachusetts, says not to worry if your child doesn't like traditional breakfast foods.

"One of the first things I do in assessing a child is ask parents if their child is a 'sweet kid' or a 'savory kid.' You can tell very early on if a child has a preference for sweet or savory." Hangen explains that most traditional breakfasts may not appeal to kids with savory preferences. "In this case, savory kids might like macaroni and cheese for breakfast, spaghetti, or a sandwich," says Hangen. "A meal is a meal; it's just a healthful combination of favorable carbohydrates—if you can, use whole grains, fruits, and vegetables—heart healthy oils and of course lean protein." Fresh fruit served with something like macaroni and cheese can help children get fiber in the morning.

But I'm Not Hungry!

What is a parent to do if her child doesn't have an appetite early in the day? "Don't let kids get away with not eating. Even small is good," says Hangen.

"Consider if your child is a morning person or a night person," she says. "A lot of times the morning person tends to be more hungry than the night owls." She adds that people who consume most of their calories late in the day may not want to eat much in the morning. If this is

the case with your child, Hangen recommends spreading his calories more evenly out throughout the day.

Kids don't need a huge breakfast to get a good start, either. Hangen recommends half a sports bar for young kids (although not more than one a day because their vitamin and mineral content is formulated for adults) or even a glass of milk, which supplies carbohydrates, protein and some fat if the milk is one percent. The protein, says Hangen, provides a prolonged sense of satiety, or feeling of fullness, throughout the morning.

Vary the Breakfast Choices

If your kids just seem uninterested in what is served, try getting creative. Breakfast doesn't have to be boring! Following are some suggestions for kid-pleasing morning meals; yet this list is just a start. Use your imagination and ask your child for her opinion on what makes a good breakfast, too!

- A childhood favorite, peanut butter is a versatile morning food. Spread on top of whole wheat toast or an English muffin, serve it up with bananas in a sandwich, or eat it on apple slices. Of course nothing goes with peanut butter like a glass of cold milk!
- Try a morning parfait simply by layering granola, yogurt and fruit.
- Got leftovers? Serve leftover pizza, soup, pasta or even casserole if it's what your child will eat. Add a small piece of fruit and/or some milk, too.
- Offer light breakfast eaters low fat cheese, fruit and whole wheat crackers.
- Whether scrambled, hard boiled or "fried" in a non-stick skillet, eggs are a great breakfast protein and are yummy paired with toast or a piece of fresh fruit.
- Check cookbooks or the Internet for a heart-healthy muffin recipe low in fat and higher in fiber. Many muffins freeze well and can be popped in the microwave for a quick meal.
- Oatmeal is especially filling on cold mornings. Serve it up with sliced fruit inside, sprinkled with cinnamon, or with a bit of maple syrup or applesauce stirred in.
- Cottage cheese or yogurt goes well with fresh fruit and half a bagel or a fruit-filled breakfast bar.