

The After-School Snack: 4th Meal of the Day

The time is three o'clock in the afternoon, and suddenly your kitchen is under attack. Ravenous children are invading, hoping to indulge in something quick and tasty to curb the after-school munchies. All too often, the amount of food consumed seems more like a meal than a snack. Even more often, the amount of fat and calories consumed is off the chart. Easy and delicious have become nutritionally empty, fat-filled, sugar loaded convenience foods. Bags of chips, cookies, granola bars, sport drinks, and microwave popcorn lead the pack. Short of padlocking all cupboards and refrigerators, parents find it difficult to avoid this feeding frenzy.

Children often eat a light breakfast because they are rushed or just aren't hungry first thing in the morning. Lunchtime is more of a quick bite for your social butterflies, eager to enjoy the sunshine and play with friends. By three o'clock, it is understandable for your children to be absolutely famished.

Here are some healthy snacking ideas to help increase the nutritional value of after-school refreshments, without a lot of extra effort:

Prepare convenience packs of healthy snacks. Most often, children want what they can grab quickly. A bag of baby carrots or sliced apples in the refrigerator is an easy fix. You can offer low-fat dressing, yogurt, or peanut butter for their dipping pleasure. Small bags of pretzels make good alternatives to chips. Satisfy a sweet tooth with a fruit and yogurt parfait. Chocolate lovers can enjoy a cold glass of fat-free chocolate milk instead of a chocolate cookie or candy bar.

Save dinner leftovers. When making dinner, especially family favorites, intentionally cook for an extra person or two. A piece of grilled chicken chopped and tossed over a green salad makes for a delicious and nutritious snack. Even a small serving of last-night's lasagna has a perfect balance of complex carbohydrates (whole-grain pasta) and protein (ricotta and mozzarella cheeses) to give your child an instant pick-me-up, plus the staying power to conquer after-school activities.

Does dinner have to wait until six o'clock? While you may not have as much flexibility when breakfast and lunch are served, you can swap the snack with dinner. If your child is on the brink of starvation when he comes through the door and an apple just isn't going to cut it, serve dinner extra early, and have a lighter, much smaller meal later.

Raid the lunchbox. If you put an icepack in an insulated lunchbox, chances are the food your child was too busy to eat at school is still cold and fresh. Encourage your children to open their lunchboxes and enjoy all of the wonderfully nutritious things you packed only hours ago.

Healthy snacking need not be labor intensive, but a little creativity and preparation will give your children the nutrients they need to boost brain power and the energy they need to master the playing field.

For additional nutrition tips and recipe ideas, explore the USDA's website dedicated to improving the nutrition and well-being of Americans (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>) and KidsHealth, one of the largest nonprofit organizations devoted to children's health with additional tips for teens (http://kidshealth.org/teen/food_fitness/nutrition/healthy_snacks.html#).