How to Prepare Safe and Healthy 'Bag' Lunches for Our Children

Summer break for our children has drifted away and the thrill of a new school year is upon us. For many parents, packing lunch is often a challenge. With the increased incidence of childhood obesity, parents desire to pack lunches that are not only appetizing, but nutritional as well. Coupled with packing a nutritional and appetizing lunch is the need to ensure that lunches are packed safely to minimize the risk of our children getting a foodborne illness.

Parents may be puzzled as to where to begin. The good news is that there are resources available to provide guidance and tips on packing healthy lunches. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)[1] has information on how to package 'bag' lunches safely. A shortened version of USDA's recommendations for packing a lunch safely include:

- Washing hands before preparing or eating food
- Packing only the amount of perishable food that will be eaten at lunchtime.
- Keeping perishable sandwiches safe by freezing the sandwich or using an ice source, such as a gel pack or frozen juice box. The frozen juice box may be used as the drink to accompany the sandwich or perishable item for lunch.
- Considering packing foods that do not require a cold source, such as whole fruits and vegetables.

To help ensure that your child has a healthy lunch, it is important that we 'make smart choices from each food group.'[2] "Taste of Ebony"[3] has a wonderful mix and match chart to allow for easy selection from each food group. A shortened version of its recommendations for a healthy child's lunch include selecting a food from each group. For example:

- Protein: Select chicken, tuna, eggs, roast beef, or peanut butter
- Grains: Select whole-wheat pasta or breads
- Vegetables: Select cherry tomatoes, celery sticks, sliced cucumbers
- Fruits and Nuts: Select an apple, grapes, a mixed fruit cup, berries, or walnuts
- Dairy: String cheese or yogurt (reduced or low-fat options)

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[4], 'almost everyone needs to eat more fruits and vegetables.' What better way to improve the nutritional value of our children's lunch by adding fresh fruits and vegetables, for example, apples, oranges, bananas, grapes, or baby carrots. Fresh fruits and vegetables provide vitamins and minerals that are necessary to help our children grow to be healthy adults. Additionally, replacing fruits and vegetables for higher calorie processed foods can also help our children to obtain and maintain a healthy weight.

We are hopeful that you find this information useful as we, as Americans and parents, work toward reducing overweight and obesity among our children. For more information about packing safe lunches, healthy eating tips, and healthy weight, please visit:

[1]Keeping "Bag" Lunches Safe. USDA, Food Safety and Inpsection Service. Available at: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/factsheets/Keeping_Bag_Lunches_Safe/index.asp Accessed: August 18, 2010

[2]Dietary Guidelines. USDA. Available at: www.mypyramid.gov/guidelines/index.html. Accessed: August 19, 2010

[3]Lyons, Charlotte. Taste of Ebony: Mix It Up! Easy Lunches for You and Your Kids. Ebony. September 2010.

[4]Eat More Fruits and Vegetables. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at: http://www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov/downloads/eat_more_fv.pdf Accessed: August 18, 2010