



Article by Dr. Mary Ann Iyer, MD, MA

Organic Back to School

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Is organic living and eating easy for you – until the school year rolls around? Do you despair of how to keep your kids on a healthy diet, knowing they face standard cafeteria food fare every noon? Most of our local schools offer salad bars and healthy choices – but even so, children are bombarded daily with advertising seductions to go for the fad of the day.

Here are a few tips to make it easier:

1. Make your own.

This sure seems like a good idea – until the reality of time crunch hits. Or the fallout from peer pressure seeps in the front door with whining protests. Let's face it – children are the age group who most want to fit in. (Do you remember the alarm you felt at your mother's clothes selections for you?) If everyone is chowing down on Sloppy Joes and French fries and your child is the lone carrot-cruncher, she'll feel isolated as a matter of course. It would take a huge personality to overcome this disparity.

2. Make it easier.

Find out what the going "thing" is currently – and duplicate it as much as possible: Sloppy Joes? Easy enough to make this in advance from good, organic ingredients to send along. Or – if you prefer vegetarian, how about tofu in a tomato sauce over a bun? Why not? Some might not even notice the difference. Tater Tots? Try sautéed chunks of tempeh mixed into your own version of "tater tots" to add some nutrients to the mix. You get the idea. Be creative!

3. Involve others.

Gather with like-minded adults who have children of your child's age. Agree in advance what the "menu" for your select little cooperative will be. Three – or four – or five children eating the same thing constitutes a peer group too, and protects them from the isolation factor. Who knows? You may find others who'd like to take turns, and form a rotating round of responsibility for the day's fare. Imagine that – only prepping once a week for five children. Voila – you've addressed the time crunch, too!

You should also know about a few programs and the efforts that your local school is making along the lines of "keeping it healthy" for the sake of the kids who attend. There are individuals dedicated to making this challenge easier for us all.

The local "Farm to Table" program features a different farm each month. Participants make presentations and focus on local, healthy, organic foods, inspiring the youngsters to develop a

taste for what's good for them by making it interesting. There are parent liaisons at most schools, so inquire at the school where your child attends to become more active in this program.

The "Interfaith Farm and Food Partnership" is funded by a USDA grant and offers ongoing education in the realms of nutrition and food – eating, preparation, and origins.

Additionally, many schools make a concerted effort within the confines of their own halls to make a difference for the sake of the youth who attend. Marcy Hermens at Hoover Elementary comments, "We try to create relationships with healthy vendors for donations. For example, we offer yogurt instead of ice cream for snacks when we are able." An additional way that you as a parent can help with the local school food scene is to provide ideas and real contacts with just such vendors. It is not only the sugar and fast-fat industries who can donate to schools to further their name amongst the youth!

So – reach out at the next parent's gathering. Connect with your neighbors. Make an effort to get to know your child's favorite friends. Form that mini-cooperative. Call your school office and ask about the need for volunteers or connections for the programs they participate in. And take it from there. Your child may become part of a growing collective for whom healthy is the norm!

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