

Healthy Celebrations

Promoting a Healthy School Environment



Birthday parties and holiday celebrations at school provide a unique opportunity to help make healthful eating fun and exciting for children. Schools can take advantage of classroom celebrations to serve food that tastes good, is nutritious, and provides students with an opportunity for nutrition education experiences.

But It's Just a Cupcake...



Typically, foods for school celebrations include cupcakes, candy, cookies and soda. So what's the harm? There is nothing wrong with an occasional treat, but unhealthy choices have become the norm rather than the exception. Parties, treats used as classroom rewards, food fundraisers, vending machines, snacks and school stores constantly expose children to high-fat, high-sugar, low-nutrient choices.

Overall, our children's eating habits are poor. Only two percent of children meet all Food Pyramid recommendations. Most children do not eat enough fruits, vegetables or whole grains. Obesity rates among children are on the rise, with serious health consequences. Constant exposure to low-nutrient foods makes it difficult for children to learn how to make healthy food choices. By providing students with nutritious choices wherever food is available (including the classroom), schools can positively influence children's eating habits.

Benefits of Healthy Celebrations

Healthy Kids Learn Better: Research clearly demonstrates that good nutrition is linked to better behavior and academic performance. To provide the best possible learning environment for children, schools must also provide an environment that supports healthy behaviors.

Provides Consistent Messages: Providing healthy classroom celebrations demonstrates a school commitment to promoting healthy behaviors. It supports the classroom lessons students are learning about health, instead of contradicting them. Healthy celebrations promote positive lifestyle choices to reduce student health risks and improve learning.

Promotes a Healthy School Environment: In order to positively change eating behaviors, students need to receive consistent, reliable health information and ample opportunity to use it. Healthy celebrations are an important part of providing a healthy school environment.

Creates Excitement About Nutrition: Children are excited about new and different things, including fun party activities and healthy snacks (see back for ideas). School staff and parents need not worry that children will be disappointed if typical party foods aren't served in the classroom. Holiday treats and traditional birthday parties with cake will still be available at home.

Protects Children with Food Allergies: When parents send in food, it is difficult to ensure the safety of children with food allergies. Schools can protect food allergic children by providing nonfood celebrations or, if food is served, obtaining it from known sources such as the school food service program.



How-To's for Happy Healthy Parties¹

- Variety is the "spice of life" and the "life of the party." Plan several contrasting activities – active and quiet, indoor and outdoor, individual and group.
- Try something new. Children like adventure. In addition to familiar games and foods, offer something different.
- Plan creative experiences such as art, music and cooking.
- Involve children in planning and preparing the party. Let them make decorations and favors.
- Put food in its proper place. Refreshments should compliment the fun, not become the "main event."
- Be sure that each child receives a prize or favor, if such awards are given.
- Don't use food as rewards or prizes.
- Choose foods for fun, good taste and health. Parties that feature healthful foods provide opportunities for children to practice making wise food choices.



¹ Printed with permission from *Let's Party: Party Ideas for School and Home*. West Virginia Department of Education, 1994. Ordering information at: <http://wvde.state.wv.us/ctrc/materials.html>.

What Schools Can Do

Ideas for Healthy Celebrations

Schools can help promote a positive learning environment by providing healthy celebrations that shift the focus from the food to the child. Choose a variety of activities, games and crafts that children enjoy. When food is served, make it count with healthy choices! Parties can even incorporate a fun nutrition lesson by involving children in the planning and preparation of healthy snacks. Try these ideas for fun activities and healthy foods at school parties and other celebrations.

Activities to Celebrate the Child

- Plan special party games and activities. Ask parents to provide game supplies, pencils, erasers, stickers and other small school supplies instead of food.
- Create a healthy party idea book. Ask school staff and parents to send in healthy recipes and ideas for activities, games and crafts. Compile these ideas into a book that staff and parents can use.
- Give children extra recess time instead of a class party. For birthdays, let the birthday child choose and lead an active game for everyone.
- Instead of food, ask parents to purchase a book for the classroom or school library in the birthday child's name. Read it to the class or invite the child's parents to come in and read it to the class.
- Instead of a party, organize a special community service project, e.g., invite Senior Citizens in for lunch, make "curechiefs" for chemotherapy patients, and blankets for rescue dogs. Involve parents in planning the project and providing needed materials.
- Create a "Celebrate Me" book. Have classmates write stories or poems and draw pictures to describe what is special about the birthday child.
- Provide special time with the principal or another adult, such as taking a walk around the school at recess.
- Create a special birthday package. The birthday child wears a sash and crown, sits in a special chair and visits the principal's office for a special birthday surprise (pencil, sticker, birthday card, etc.)
- The birthday child is the teacher's assistant for the day, and gets to do special tasks like make deliveries to office, lead the line, start an activity, and choose a game or story.



Additional Resources

- Alternatives to Food Rewards.* Connecticut State Department of Education, 2004.
<http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Student/NutritionEd/index.htm>
- Classroom Party Ideas.* University of California Cooperative Extension Ventura County.
<http://ucce.ucdavis.edu/files/filelibrary/2372/15801.pdf>
- Healthy Fundraising.* Connecticut State Department of Education, 2005.
<http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Student/NutritionEd/index.htm>
- Let's Party: Party Ideas for School and Home.* West Virginia Department of Education, 1994.
<http://wvde.state.wv.us/ctrc/materials.html>
- Let's Play: Innovative Games and Activities for Kids.* West Virginia Department of Education, 2002. <http://wvde.state.wv.us/ctrc/materials.html>
- For more healthy snack resources, see the Connecticut Nutrition Resource Library catalog ("Cooking for Kids" section) at: <http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Student/NutritionEd/index.htm>

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Healthy Food Ideas*

- Low-fat or nonfat plain or flavored milk, 100% juice, water, flavored/sparkling water (without added sugars or sweeteners), sparkling punch (seltzer and 100% fruit juice)
- Fruit smoothies (blend berries, bananas and pineapple)
- Fresh fruit assortment, fruit and cheese kabobs, fruit salad, fruit with low-fat whipped topping
- Dried fruit (raisins, cranberries, apricots, banana chips), 100% fruit snacks
- Vegetable trays with low-fat dip, celery and carrots with peanut butter and raisins
- Whole-grain crackers with cheese cubes, string cheese or hummus
- Waffles or pancakes topped with fruit
- Pretzels, low-fat popcorn, rice cakes, bread sticks, graham crackers and animal crackers
- Angel food cake, plain or topped with fruit
- Bagel slices with peanut butter or jam, fruit or grain muffin (low-fat), whole wheat English muffin, hot pretzels
- Pizza with low-fat toppings (vegetables, lean ham, Canadian bacon), pizza dippers with marinara sauce
- Ham, cheese or turkey sandwiches or wraps (with low-fat condiments)
- Low-fat pudding, low-fat yogurt, squeezable yogurt, yogurt smoothies, yogurt parfaits or banana splits (yogurt and fruit topped with cereal, granola or crushed graham crackers)
- Quesadillas or bean burrito with salsa
- Low-fat breakfast or granola bars
- Low-fat tortilla chips with salsa or bean dip
- Trail/cereal mix (whole-grain, low-sugar cereals mixed with dried fruit, pretzels, etc.)
- Nuts and seeds

*Check for food allergies before serving.

For more information on a healthy school environment, contact Susan Fiore, MS, RD, Nutrition Education Coordinator at susan.fiore@po.state.ct.us or (860) 807-2075.



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Classroom Rewards

Federal law requires every school district to have a local wellness policy. These policies address nutrition education, physical activity, school meals and all other foods and drinks available at school. Since foods and drinks are a part of every school day, local wellness policies can build healthy school environments that support successful students eating smart and moving more. Research shows that children and teens who eat smart and move more focus better and have fewer behavior problems. They also have better math, reading and writing test scores. As families, educators and administrators, you have the chance to put the policy into practice. You can make a difference by encouraging healthy options for fundraising, concessions, school stores, vending, classroom rewards and school celebrations.

Rewards and incentives are one way to encourage good behavior and improve academic performance. Your local wellness policy can define how teachers reward students. There are many good ways to reward students **without** using food or treats. Food and treat rewards can act against healthy eating messages and interfere with natural hunger cues. The power of the simple words “you did a great job” works well because respect and words of appreciation go a long way for everyone. It is important to encourage self-confidence and self-motivation so that students value their own work.

Take Action Now

School Board Members

- Are classroom rewards covered in your district’s local wellness policy? If not, include in your policy limits on food as a reward or incentive.
- Show your support for the local wellness policy

School Health Advisory Council/School Wellness Committee Members

- Find out what kind of rewards teachers give students in the classroom.
- Help school staff understand why food is not the best option for classroom rewards and discuss other ideas.

Principals

- Enforce the district wellness policy for classroom rewards that encourage non-food rewards and physical activity.
- Consider adopting a stricter classroom rewards policy for your school.

PTA Members and Families

- Encourage change in policy by talking about rewards with other parents, teachers and community members.
- Support the classroom rewards and incentives used by your child’s teacher that follow the local wellness policy.

Reward and Incentive Ideas

Ways to reward students

- Extra music and reading time
- Time for music and dancing
- Music while doing school work
- Chat break at the end of class
- Extra computer time
- Free time at the end of class
- Day for watching a movie
- Group activity
- Games
- Homework coupon
- Coupon for prizes and privileges
- Certificate/trophy/ribbon/plaque
- Gift certificate to local non-food merchants
- Free pass to sporting event or play
- Walk break from class
- Fun walk with the principal or teacher
- Guest presenter in class
- Field trip

Elementary students

- Taking things to the office
- Taking care of the class pet
- Eating with the teacher
- Prizes from a treasure box
- Pencil toppers
- Stickers

- Pencils
- Stars or smiley faces
- Paperback books
- Extra recess
- Leading the class to lunch, recess, library or other adventure

Middle School Students

- Sitting with friends
- Music concert at school
- Pencils
- Paperback books
- Pep rally
- Magazine subscriptions
- T-shirt/hat/sunglasses
- Step counter

High School Students

- Sitting with friends
- Music concert at school
- Pep rally
- Paperback books
- Magazine subscription
- T-shirt/hat/sunglasses
- Prime parking spot
- Recognition with morning
- Announcements

Example Classroom Rewards Policy in North Carolina

Clay County Schools:

In a school environment that supports healthy behaviors, teachers are encouraged to use non-food rewards for individual students or classes. Schools shall be supplied with examples of effective non-food rewards. "Foods of minimum nutritional value" shall not be used as rewards. If food is used, only nutrient-rich foods in appropriate portion sizes shall be given to students.

For more information on local wellness policy...

www.nchealthyschools.org
www.nutritionnc.com
www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com

