

9 Healthy Snack Ideas for Kids

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When I was growing up, a common refrain was "no snacking between meals" or "you'll spoil your dinner." Today, nutritionists are saying just the opposite is true. For kids and adults, it's recommended that we all eat five or six smaller meals spaced out over the day instead of the three traditional pig-outs. This is especially true for children, who, if they haven't already succumbed to obesity, have much smaller stomachs than adults. What this means is that kids don't, and shouldn't, eat as much as grownups at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And their fast-burning little metabolisms will make quick use of what does fit in their stomachs at lunch, which means they're going to have to refuel before suppertime rolls around. So snacking is a good thing, but, of course, not all snacks are good.



The two most important things to consider regarding snacks for kids (and for us adults, for that matter) are variety and portion size. A good rule of thumb is to try and incorporate two different food groups into any snack and to keep the portion size between 100 and 200 calories. The required amount of calories will vary depending on your child's age and activity level, but a snack should ideally be a small energy booster to help them make it until their next meal, not a meal in itself. Hopefully, it'll be a quick bite on the way outside to play and/or exercise, and not a side dish for a TV or video-game marathon. Other things that make good snacks are foods high in nutrients, fiber, and protein and foods low in sugar, sodium, and saturated and trans fats. And bad news for the culinarily impaired—if it's prepackaged, processed food, it's unlikely it will be a healthy choice for your young 'un. But the good news is that children have simple tastes, which usually translates into food that's simple to prepare. Here are some ideas for when your munchkins get the munchies, plus, for the first time ever, my mom's nutritious pancake recipe!



- 1. Vegetables.** I know what you're thinking—"Great! I get to force-feed my kids two more times a day!" It's true—vegetables are usually the diciest component of kid cuisine. But it's worth the effort, because veggies give you more nutritional bang for your buck than any other food group. And if you get creative, you can usually find a way to get your kids to eat them without too much emotional scarring. Many dinner table disputes are about kids trying to assert their independence. You can get around this by letting your kids assist in the selection and preparation of the vegetables. If you take them to the farmers market and let them pick out the vegetables, learn about how they're grown, etc., you're more likely to get more buy-in back home when it's time to eat the vegetables. You can also give them choices like certified organic



celery sticks or baby carrots. But don't use dessert as a negotiating tool, as in the old standby, "no dessert until you eat all your vegetables." You just end up vilifying the vegetables and glamorizing empty calories—and those are values they'll take into adulthood. Talk up the veggies and let them know all the health benefits they'll get from eating them. If you have a little extra time, try carving or arranging the vegetables on a plate to make faces or something more decorative and fun. You can also try serving veggies with a low-fat yogurt or organic cottage-cheese dip.

- 2. Fruits.** Fruits are a marginally easier sell than vegetables. They're sweeter and appeal more to kids' palates. Although, one thing to watch out for is fruit juice. A lot of people make the mistake of thinking a serving of fruit and a serving of juice are interchangeable. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting juice for kids to a couple of drinks a day, as juice is a contributing factor to dental cavities and gastrointestinal problems. Whole fruit, on the other hand, provides tons of fiber and other nutrients, and kids can partake of it quite freely, without any adverse effects. As with vegetables, if you have the patience and the knife skills, fruit can be carved into fun shapes or you can make fruit kabobs. You can also come up with low-fat healthy dips like yogurt that kids can dunk their fruit into. On hot summer days, try freezing some grapes or a banana as an alternative to a mid-afternoon Fudgesicle. With both fruits and vegetables, you might consider setting up a big "snack bowl" in the kitchen. Let the kids help choose which fruits and veggies go in the snack bowl, and then give them permission to grab what they want from the bowl whenever they're hungry. This will help them feel like they're in control of what they're eating, but without giving them carte blanche to hit the sugar or the chips.



- 3. Cereals.** Kids love cereal and the good news is that a lot of popular commercial cereals have made the switch to organic whole-grain flour. However, as nutritionist Marion Nestle said in a recent interview, whole-wheat Cocoa Puffs are still Cocoa Puffs. If the whole grains are largely serving as a matrix to deliver a ton of sugar to your child, they're not worth eating. On the other hand, there are a lot of cereals, like Cheerios and the Kashi line, which have a lot of whole grains and not so much sugar. So check the label and try to choose cereals that have a high fiber-to-sugar ratio. Cereals create another opportunity to reinforce a good lifelong eating habit. Try to discourage your kids from eating directly from the box. In fact, here's a way you can replicate the convenience of prepackaged foods right in your own home! Just get some resealable sandwich bags or a bunch of small sealable containers. When you buy a big box of cereal, pour snack-sized portions into the bags or containers. You can even stuff the bags back in the box for storage. This is great for last-minute lunch



packing, or your kids can grab a cereal snack for themselves. This will help fight against the temptation for unlimited munching from the open cereal box. Plus, who knows where those little hands have been? When they're elbow-deep in the communal cereal, it's pretty gross when you think about it.

- 4. Peanut butter.** One of the best protein sources is a kid favorite—raw peanut butter. Or raw organic almond butter. With eight grams of protein in a two-tablespoon serving, nut butter's are a winner. Again, though, portion size is key as peanut butter is fairly high in calories (188) and fat (16 g)—two tablespoons will usually suffice for a snack. Try making that old party favorite—ants on a log. Fill a stick of celery (the log) with peanut butter, then embed raisins (the ants) in the peanut butter. When choosing your peanut butter, try to find brands that only contain one ingredient—organic almonds or peanuts. Some stores even let you grind your own now. Many brands contain so much sugar you might as well be giving your kid frosting.



- 5. Protein.** Lunch meat is a great snack, but don't be lured into the sinister den of the Lunchables. Sliced free range turkey or chicken are great lunch meats to have on hand. Stay away from processed meats like bologna or salami though. You never know what you're getting, and often you're getting a lot of fat and sodium. If you can't sell a sandwich on whole-grain bread, try making a turkey roll-up—stack a slice or two of turkey, raw milk cheese, lettuce, tomato, a low-cal condiment like mustard, and roll everything in a sprouted whole-grain lavash, stuff it into a pita, or skip the bread and roll it up on its own. Tuna and salmon are also really healthy, and can be doctored in a salad with some yogurt instead of mayo. Check with your doctor about how much tuna and other types of seafood your child should consume. There is a greater risk of mercury poisoning for younger children, so some limits may need to be observed.



- 6. Trail mix.** This is another great way you can involve your children in their own diet. Gather a selection of healthy snacks like raw unsalted peanuts, raw walnuts, raw almonds, pecans, sunflower seeds, raisins, dried berries, dried apricots, oats, organic healthy cereal, and anything else crunchy or chewy and healthy that you can think of that your kids will like. Despite their availability in commercial trail mixes, chocolate chips and marshmallows should probably be off the list. **Put out the ingredients and let your kids choose which of their favorites they're mixing up.** For younger kids, you can even present it as if they're making a magic potion or something. By letting them be involved in the creative stage, you'll hopefully get better results in the eating stage. After all, they made it—who are they going to



complain to? Some store-bought trail mixes and granola bars are also pretty decent. Just check the labels carefully. Some less-scrupulous companies pack their "health" foods with sugar and saturated fats like coconut and palm oils.

- 7. Pizza.** While most delivery and frozen pizza is packed with fat and calories, pizza can actually be pretty healthy. It's basically a bit of bread, some tomato sauce, some cheese, and healthy toppings. And yet again, it can be a meal and an activity for your child. If you don't have the time to make the full-on dough from scratch, you can make pizza with a lavash or a low-fat tortilla, or you can make mini pizzas with whole-wheat English muffins. Add a dollop of sauce and let your child choose toppings from a variety of healthy ingredients: mushrooms, peppers, onions, eggplant, veggie or turkey pepperoni—the sky or the structural integrity of your crust's the limit. Sprinkle some low-fat mozzarella on top and stick it in the oven or toaster oven until melted.



- 8. Smoothies.** A lot of kids will refuse to eat any fruits or vegetables unless a massive amount of processing has been undertaken. Here's where the blender or food processor can be your best friend. By keeping a few bags of frozen fruit on hand, you and your little kitchen helper can make your own smoothies. Just pick a combination of your favorite fruits, add a little plain, nonfat yogurt, some ice, some banana slices, or some peanut butter, and blend until smooth. It's a sweet, cold summer treat, and gives your kids all the fiber and nutrients from fruit that a lot of fruit juices miss.



- 9. Healthy-packed cooler.** It's summertime, which means it could be time for a family road trip. Hopefully, you'll have room in the car for a cooler packed with healthy snacks like the ones mentioned above, but occasionally, the siren song of the roadside mini-mart or vending machine is too much to resist. Also, the Center for Science in the Public Interest recently released a list of commercially available snack foods that are relatively decent. The list includes: applesauce cups; Chex mix, traditional flavor; fruit cups; low-fat/sugar granola bars; and raisins. But save some money and save some calories. Pack a cooler.



BONUS: My Mom's Pancake Recipe

Like so many of my family's "secret" recipes, this began life on the side of a package of food. In this case, a carton of eggs (no surprise when you see the second ingredient). But this is a pretty good way of sneaking extra protein into your kids' diet—it'll definitely get a



better reaction than a boiled egg and a scoop of cottage cheese on a Saturday morning. For the grownups who are watching their cholesterol, my brother came up with a variation, substituting six egg whites and half an avocado for the six eggs. The pancakes turn out a bit green, but if you can get past that, they're quite tasty. You can top them with your favorite fresh fruit. If you can't live without maple syrup, go for grade B or grade C. They contain more of the natural minerals that the grade A syrup filters out. And they're cheaper!

My Mom's Pancake Recipe

1 cup fat-free cottage cheese

6 eggs

1/2 cup whole-wheat flour (or 1/4 cup whole-wheat and 1/4 cup barley flour)

1/4 cup vegetable oil

Pinch of salt

Dash of vanilla extract

1/4 cup milk

Blend or food process first six ingredients on high until smooth. Add milk slowly to reach batter consistency. Cook on a hot, nonstick griddle. Number of pancakes vary by size. Serves 6.

Preparation Time: 10 minutes

Nutritional Information: (per serving)

Calories: 225

Protein: 13 g

Fiber: 1.5 g

Carbs: 9 g

Fat Total: 15 g

Saturated Fat: 3 g