



SOUTH BRUNSWICK: BACK TO SCHOOL: Healthy bagged lunches, snacks made easy

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Like many parents, Gabrielle Graff works hard to ensure that her daughter, Paige, eats plenty of healthy foods.

The Skillman resident made sure her daughter, 11, knew from an early age that she was not allowed to turn up her nose at any food on her plate without first taking a “no thank you” bite.

”Until you make them try things, you and they don’t know what they’ll like,” Ms. Graff said.

It’s a lesson that’s served them well – and taught them a thing or two along the way.

For example, Paige doesn’t like kale salad, but when she tried kale chips, Ms. Graff found she had a sure-fire recipe for her arsenal.

Trying a different preparation method is a tip Ms. Graff got from a group she belongs to: Suppers for Healthy Moms and Children. This group of like-minded parents is intent on preparing healthy foods, and occasionally sneaking in some extra nutritional goodness.

”One lesson I came away with is to always sneak spinach, fresh or frozen, into smoothies. Blueberries or chocolate help camouflage the color,” Ms. Graff said.

”It’s nice to have the support of a community where you’re all struggling with the same things: how do we feed our kids healthy things; how do we find healthy things?” Ms. Graff said. “The members share recipe ideas and tips that have worked for them, and we can all bring home these tips and try them on our families.”

Ms. Graff credits the group for introducing her to quinoa, a grain she’d never tried before. Since then, she’s found several different ways to prepare it.

"We love it," she said. "We were rice and pasta eaters for such a long time; quinoa is a nice change."

The only downside of having a child who's an adventurous eater?

"She's not a cheap eater," Ms. Graff said with a laugh. "She doesn't often order from the children's menu, since she doesn't really want chicken fingers, burgers, pasta or pizza. She likes flavor and good food, and now she's big enough now to eat an adult-sized entrée by herself!"

Suppers for Healthy Moms and Children meets on the second and fourth Thursdays of each month, alternating between the homes of its co-facilitators, Lee Yonish of Princeton and Eve Golfinopoulos of Skillman. (The group is on hiatus for the summer; meetings resume in September.)

Members pay for the food that's prepared at each meeting, and also agree to help with prep or clean up. Meetings last about 90 minutes. Ms. Yonish asks that anyone interested in attending a meeting register early, since space is limited.

A lot of helpful ideas have come out of the conversations with the moms in the group, Ms. Yonish said.

One mother simply said, "Let the junk food run out," Ms. Yonish said, and was pleasantly surprised to discover that her kids didn't ask about it, but instead grabbed the healthy snacks that were available.

Another mom told the group that if her children ask her where something went, she explains that that particular item is no longer in the food budget.

"I do that with juice boxes," Ms. Yonish said. "I told my kids that since we can drink water in place of juice, we're going to save the money we'd use for juice for something much more fun. Now my kids just have fun water bottles that they fill up when they're thirsty, and juice boxes or sugary drinks are considered treats."

When it comes to soda, Ms. Yonish said, "a lot of moms are now telling their children that they will not have it in the house, and it's non-negotiable."

Ideas for healthy lunches and after-school snacks

Getting kids to eat healthier is a little easier when kids feel like they have some control.

"Some mothers in our group have explained to their children that they need to choose one vegetable and one fruit to have in their school lunch each day," Ms. Yonish said. "It's nice to give kids choices when enforcing rules like this. You can even run a taste test with a few different dressings and dips to see which is the favorite for cut-up

vegetables. Have your kids actually make the dressings or dips with you, pushing the buttons on the blender, and see if their participation gets them more excited to try their own creations.”

If children come home from school crabby, Ms. Yonish said, “this is likely a result of low blood sugar. Getting them a high-protein snack right after pick-up may help to stabilize their mood.”

Some of the mothers in Ms. Yonish’s group are keen on smoothies.

”Smoothies allow them to hide all kinds of beneficial ingredients, like nuts and seeds, avocados or coconut oil, or fruit they may not choose to have if it were fresh,” Ms. Yonish said. “To sweeten the smoothie, try dates instead of refined sugars.”

Ms. Yonish suggests going online for other fun lunch ideas. Three sites she enjoys are: www.planetbox.com, www.everydaypaleo.com and www.laptoplunches.com.

Suppers for Healthy Moms and Children is part of The Suppers Programs, a non-profit group dedicated to helping people ease an array of health concerns through healthful, fresh cooking. There’s also a Suppers Program for Teens, which teaches teens to prepare from scratch healthful foods that taste good, improve moods, and make it easier to focus and learn.

Visit www.thesuppersprogram.org or email info@thesuppersprogram.org