

Healthy Classroom Celebrations

Compiled by the Jefferson County Public Schools' Wellness Committee

From birthday parties to holiday celebrations, throughout the school year children and teachers have numerous reasons to celebrate. Celebrations are a great way for children to feel part of their school community, where the learning environment is made more welcoming and where children, teachers and parents can come together to enjoy a break from routine. Children are usually not concerned about the foods that are offered at school parties; they look forward to sharing free time with teachers, parents and their friends.

Students are taught good nutrition and the value of healthy food choices, in the classroom. However, many times foods served in the classroom, in the case of a class party, are low in nutrients and high in calories. Traditionally, school parties center on foods such as cupcakes, cookies, candy, chips and beverages such as punch and sugar-laden soft drinks. This sends students a mixed message – that good nutrition is just an academic exercise that is not supported by school administration and is not important to their health or education.

To send the right message administrators, teachers, and parents need to promote healthy lifestyle principles, replacing unhealthy food offerings with healthy ones; thus shifting the focus of classroom celebrations from the food to the child.

When one considers the increasing incidence of childhood obesity, the establishment of Local School Wellness Policies, and the understanding that children who are well-nourished are better learners and are better behaved, it stands to reason that school parties are an avenue through which healthy alternatives can be included in the fun. Schools can take advantage of classroom celebrations to serve food that tastes great, is nutritious and supports nutrition education efforts. When school parties promote health, schools are helping to positively change not only the eating behaviors of children, but of parents also.

Teachers can serve as role models for healthy choices and help children develop lifelong habits of eating well and being active. School parties provide an excellent opportunity for teachers and parents to work together toward these goals. Parents look forward to being with their children during the school day and usually are the ones planning school parties. Administrators and teachers must lead the way in helping parents understand the importance of healthy alternatives to traditional party treats.

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. School staff and parents need to encourage the development of good eating habits; and by their example can teach children that party food can be healthy.
- **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.
- **Puts Food in its Proper Place:** Refreshments should compliment the fun, not become the "main event."

Refreshment Ideas for Healthy Celebrations

Low-fat Milk/ flavored milk	100% Juice
Water/ flavored water (calorie-free)	Fresh fruit assortment
Fruit and cheese kabobs	Fruit w/ whipped topping
100% fruit snacks	Vegetable trays
Cheese- cubes, string	Pretzels
Low fat popcorn	Graham crackers
Vanilla wafers	Fig Newtons
Animal crackers	Low-fat/Fat-free Pudding
Angel food cake- plain/topped with fruit	Sugar-free Gelatin w/fruit
Yogurt	Yogurt smoothies
Yogurt parfaits/ banana splits	Quesadillas with salsa
Low-fat breakfast or granola bars	Trail/ Cereal Mixes
Pizza with low fat toppings (veggie, lean ham, Canadian bacon)	
Pizza dippers (pizza toppings and bread on skewer with marinara dip)	
Ham, cheese, or turkey sandwiches (with low fat condiments)	

Treats should be commercially prepared or pre-packaged for safety and sanitation reasons.

Fun and Health at Classroom Parties

? For an up-coming party, send home a list of healthy snacks and ask for parents to sign up to bring one of the items listed. Such a list lets parents know you think nutritional balance is important even during celebrations.

? Let the children plan a healthy party menu and prepare the food for their party. Ideas like fruit smoothies, trail mix with raisins, cereal and dried fruit, and fruit salad are easy no-cook party fair.

? Plan a thematic craft for the party. For example, painting pumpkins for Halloween, or Valentine mailboxes for holding cards children will receive.

? Party games are always a hit. Have a Back –to-School scavenger hunt where children look for school supply items is a lot of fun! Children love to hunt for treasure.

? Take some time to go outside—kids will appreciate the extra free time and fresh air built into the party.

? For goody bags, use pencils, erasers, or small toys and stickers instead of candy.

? Parents can honor their child’s birthday by donating a book to the school library or classroom in their name. Have the parent come and read the book to the class.

? Parents can donate funds to purchase new playground or P.E. equipment in a child’s name, such as jump ropes, or playground balls.

? 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 a party, organize a special community service project, e.g., invite Senior Citizens in for lunch, make cards or craft gifts for patients in nursing homes/hospitals, or work with an animal rescue organization. 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.

? 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.