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Wednesday, August 18, 2004

[Archive](#) (1999- )

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## What's for lunch?

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By [Rose Marie Feagin](#)

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[Archives](#)

[Local Sports](#)

[Elections](#)

[Nation/World](#)

[Ohio News](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Technology](#)

[Space & Science](#)

[Weather](#)

[Entertainment](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Shopping](#)

[Homes](#)

[Cars](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Customer Service](#)

[Network](#)

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MANSFIELD -- On any given day you'll find Kara Dingess sitting in the cafeteria with her lunch bag and bologna sandwich -- except when the school serves pizza.

"We always have to buy for pizza day," her mother, Chris Dingess said.

The soon-to-be fourth grader plans to pack a bologna sandwich, an apple and a container of yogurt for lunch. When the Lexington school district starts classes Aug. 31, he mom will be preparing those food because Kara enjoys them.

Jena Schluter of Lexington packs for similar reasons.

The Lexington student, who will be in the eighth grade this year, said she likes to pack about twice a week because sometimes the lunch at school isn't very good.

So, instead of buying a meal that she might not eat, she will take a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, potato chips and a drink such as Capri Sun.

Whether students buy or pack their lunches, chef Ann Cooper said lunch is the perfect period to teach students about nutrition.

"School administrators and teachers often feel that school lunch is a 40-minute window when students expect the learning to stop," Cooper, who is also an New York educator, author and consultant, said.

"But each lesson taught to kids during the school day is part of their education, including lunch lessons in the cafeteria that often feature junk food as a core subject. Unless we teach kids the difference between food that is healthful and good and food that is simply available, we cannot expect them to understand the nutritional value of healthy, fresh foods," she said.

Furthermore, with statistics that show that 35 percent of American children are overweight, 25 percent are obese, and 12 percent have Type 2 diabetes, Cooper, added teaching kids about healthy

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food is the first step to improving their overall health and well-being.

"Kids need to learn that local, regional foods are not only good for them, but taste good and are fun to eat and prepare," she said.

In addition to teaching kids how to plan a healthy meal, Marlys Olson-Stuht, 29, an outpatient and community dietitian at MedCentral/Mansfield Hospital, agreed packing also gives children more control over what they eat.

Chris Dingess said she definitely agrees with Olson-Stuht.

"With school lunches, (I) don't know if she will always eat it," she said.

Packing also can provide a chance for students to add more fiber to their diets when they pack fresh fruits and vegetables.

"Each meal in the day is an important part of total food needs. A lunch should provide about one-third of the daily nutrients. The actual amount of food will vary with age and appetite. Smaller children only need small servings. Adolescent boys, on the other hand, require larger amounts," according to the Ohio State University Extension office.

Cooper offers some guidelines for parents who aren't sure about how to pack a healthy lunch. She suggests parents ask about school lunches and learn to replace some of the meals with healthier fare that costs less.

Plus, she encourages parents to explain how food is grown.

"Show kids how food is prepared and talk with them about where food comes from to help them become aware that farmers grow fresh food that tastes good," she said.

Likewise, teaching kids about good nutrition will benefit them in the long run Cooper added.


"Kids feel rewarded when they know they've made the right choice and they understand why. Teaching your family about calories, food groups, food processing and portion sizes will help them take control over their own eating habits."

She also suggests talking to kids about what is healthy. The Food Guide Pyramid can also help in planning basic meals.

"Prepare a fresh, healthy, local dinner with you kids at least once a week. Talk about the benefits of eating healthful foods while cooking with kid-friendly ingredients like mashed sweet potatoes and star fruit," she said.

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