



Celebrating at School with Health in Mind

Too many parties, too much candy, too many cupcakes ...

From birthdays to holidays, children and teachers have many reasons to celebrate during the school year. Traditionally, these parties center around food with piles of cupcakes, cookies, candy, chips, and sugary drinks on the menu. While all foods and beverages can be part of a healthy eating style, in moderation, high-calorie celebrations have become almost daily norms in classrooms rather than special events. This is a problem when:

- Children learn to eat throughout the day, even when they are not hungry.
- Children get the message that all events should be celebrated by eating or drinking – often with nutrient-poor foods and beverages.
- Too many parties add unnecessary calories, sugar, and fat, which undermine the smart nutrition habits that children are being taught at home and in school.
- Children with food allergies, intolerances, and other medical conditions may be exposed to items that may cause reactions.

A balanced approach to celebrations supports children's health.

When children and teens are well-nourished and physically active, they have fewer school absences, fewer behavior problems, and more ability to focus on classroom tasks. Healthy children also tend to score higher on standardized tests and have higher grade point averages. Families, schools, and communities must provide young people with the opportunities to develop the habits that will make them fit, healthy, and ready to succeed.

When it comes to parties, kids are often not as concerned about foods and drinks as the adults are. Children mostly look forward to sharing special time with teachers, families, and their friends. Healthy alternatives at celebrations provide consistent messages that support nutrition lessons, instead of contradicting them. When school parties promote a balanced eating style, they can help families make positive changes at home too.

Healthy party food creates excitement about nutrition.

School birthday parties and holiday celebrations provide unique opportunities to make healthy eating fun and exciting for both students and staff. Classroom and other special school events can showcase nutrient-rich food that looks beautiful and tastes great. Here is what creative people are doing to make FUN, healthful food the popular choice.

- ★ **Serve brightly colored foods to coordinate with the holiday, like a tray of fresh green veggies and fruits for St. Patrick's Day – or a green broccoli tree on a tray with cherry tomato "ornaments" (and low-fat ranch dip) in December.**
- ★ **Make shapes out of nutrient-rich foods, like hearts for Valentine's. Cut apple or watermelon slices with a cookie cutter or bake bread dough into heart shapes.**
- ★ **Let children's creativity go wild. For example, let them make animal faces on rice cakes with peanut (or sunflower) butter, raisins, grated carrots, nuts, etc.**



Successful celebrations without the same-old stuff

Children will get excited about new and different celebrations, including healthful treats – if the adults around them have a positive attitude. Involve students, families, and staff in planning new ways to celebrate. Their creativity may surprise you!

Easy ways to celebrate with nutrient-rich foods and beverages

When parties include fruits, vegetables, whole grain snacks, low-fat flavored milk, or yogurt – with small cupcakes and a little candy, kids practice and enjoy balanced eating.

- ★ **Check with your child nutrition staff.** Some local nutrition programs have begun to cater school events with healthful options.
- ★ **Establish a party food policy.** Invite families to bring juice boxes, veggie platters with dip, fruit trays, whole grain pretzels, and crackers with cheese, as well as small cupcakes or cookies. (Be sure to include information on safe food handling.) Such a list will let everyone know ahead of time that balanced nutrition is an important part of every school event.
- ★ **Get students involved.** Turn party planning into a *MyPyramid* lesson. Have the class plan a balanced menu from all food groups and bring supplies from home. Include safe food preparation as part of the event if possible. Fresh fruit salads, yogurt smoothies, and trail mixes make fun, no-cook party fare.
- ★ **Share your successes.** Collect the most popular and innovative ideas for healthful party foods into a small “cookbook” with student artwork or photos. You might even be able to use a very clever book as a school fundraiser!

Wonderful ways to celebrate without food

- ★ **Give children extra recess time instead of a class party.** For birthdays, let the birthday child choose and lead an active game for everyone.
- ★ **Provide special time with the principal or another adult,** such as taking a walk around the school or neighborhood.
- ★ **Instead of food, ask families to purchase a book for the classroom or library in the birthday child’s name.** Read the book to the class or invite the child’s parent or grandparent to come in and share it with the class.
- ★ **Create a “Celebrate Me” book for birthdays.** Have the class write stories or poems and draw pictures to describe what is special about the birthday child.
- ★ **Create a special birthday “package.”** Depending on age, the birthday child wears a sash and crown, sits in a special chair, or visits the principal’s office for a special birthday surprise (pencil, sticker, birthday card, etc.). The child could be the teacher’s assistant for the day, with special tasks like making deliveries to office, leading the line, starting an activity, or choosing a game.
- ★ **Instead of a party, organize a special community service project,** such as inviting Seniors for lunch, making “curechiefs” for chemotherapy patients, or cutting out blankets for rescue dogs. Involve community members and families in planning the project and providing needed materials.

With special thanks to Connecticut Team Nutrition – for more ideas, download www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Student/NutritionEd/Healthy_CelebrationsBW.pdf